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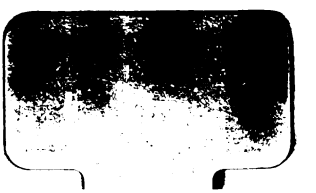

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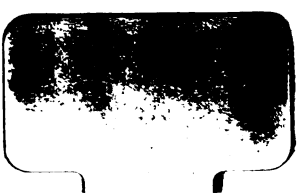

MR. & MRS. FAULCONBRIDGE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "RITA," "CONFIDENCES," "CARR OF CARRLYON," ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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MR. AND MRS. FAULCONBRIDGE.

CHAPTER I.

"LADY MARGARET'S FOLLY."

In the eyes of two persons at least, Edgar Faulconbridge appeared as a different man from that day forwards. He had sketched his own portrait, and with no flattering hand. He had hidden very little; he had sought to extenuate nothing, but such confessions never alienate sympathy. The woman who listened to him, felt how large a capacity for good or evil belonged to that restless indomitable spirit: proud and wilful, yet true and tender in its affections, and

strong in its belief of virtue. The condition of those only is hopeless in whom that belief is dead. It became possible to reconcile the discrepant elements in this strange character—or if not *all*, at least many of them—with a clue, such as Lady Trevelyan now possessed, to circumstances which had helped to form it. There was much still remaining, no doubt, which baffled scrutiny: on one point, especially, to be touched upon in a future chapter. Faulconbridge's conduct was a constant riddle to Lady Trevelyan. But this much, at least, his narrative had effected; in place of a vague curiosity, a strong interest in the narrator rose up in Lady Trevelyan's heart.

Into George's feelings with regard to Faulconbridge since that evening, it would be premature to inquire too closely. It is probable that their skein was too tangled during the days that followed for him to have rendered a very clear account of them, even to himself. He no longer evinced an antipathy to his society, that was clear. Indeed, it would have been hard to resist Edgar's pleasant conversation, and the marked change in his

manner, whenever he approached George's sofa. However sarcastic he might be at times to others, he seemed to have conceived a liking for the young heir of Stourton, which prevented Edgar's ever being so to him. Faulconbridge was a man who would probably make but few friends in his progress through life, but those whom he singled out would find it difficult to resist the subtle charm that belongs to intellectual power. It might have almost seemed that George did at first so resist. He generally rather listened than talked himself when Edgar was with him, fixing his clear blue eyes on the olive face opposite him. In the character of the man who thus sought him, there was no doubt enough to perplex more experienced heads than Stourton's, and, whether from this or any other cause, the pleasure which he found in Edgar's amusing conversation seemed to be of a mixed nature. While they were together, indeed, Stourton's laugh often rang merrily enough at some story of Edgar's, and he often called his cousin Di to share his entertainment; but a very close observer might detect, in spite

of this, that there was always a reaction when Edgar left. He not unfrequently then appeared moody and dejected.

Edgar now spent some hours in every day with George. The rehearsals went on after a fashion, that is to say, Claude Melnotte and Pauline Deschappelles spent all the mornings, and sometimes a great part of the evenings also, in perfecting their scenes together. Faulconbridge was almost always in the room, but he generally sat apart, writing, unless specially called upon for his advice, thinking it better, apparently, to let these rehearsals take their own quiet course, uninterrupted by suggestions of his. At other times, however, when his wife was out, Faulconbridge was constantly George's sole companion. It seemed difficult to believe that he had not some motive for this, beyond pure benevolence. If his object was to draw out George, and make himself master of the young heir's real character, he might be supposed to have failed, inasmuch as George talked but little, comparatively. But the intonation of a voice, the varying expression of a

face, a monosyllable dropped now and then, may reveal more of the inner man than whole speeches will. The fair seeming George bore before the world, hid no dark spots to betray themselves in unwary moments. Such as he seemed, he was; and no one could doubt, who saw the two men together, that Edgar really liked the frank, high-spirited young fellow, whose nature coming into contact with his, was like a gust of keen fresh air admitted into a room from which daylight has been long excluded.

One morning when Etheridge and Wilmot were sitting with George, Faulconbridge strolled out into the great ivy-clad porch with his cigar, and sat lolling upon the steps caressing an old mastiff, while his dark eyes roamed over the range of wood before him. At this season, when all their anatomy was visible against the pale blue April sky, (for fool's day was just past,) the silver-grey stems of beech rising from an undergrowth of holly told to even more advantage, perhaps, than when laden with their summer-wealth of leaves. The sun shone luminously on them; and here

and there on the ruddy shaft of a stately Scotch fir, crowned with its compact mass of heavy blue-green foliage, and between these shafts and stems were spaces of cool shadow, where the eye lost itself among the bare interlacing boughs. In one of these a red brick temple, surrounded by white stone pillars, in the depraved taste of the last century, was indistinctly visible from the spot where Faulconbridge sat. Upon it he fixed those keen eyes of his more than once; until his solitude was disturbed by Lady Trevelyan, who came out alone, in a garden hat, with a basket on her arm. He at once said,—

"Lady Trevelyan, I have a great curiosity to see the inside of that temple. I tried to get in yesterday, but couldn't. Have you the key?"

"Sir Richard always keeps it. I will get it for you." She returned with it in two or three minutes, and continued: "Its only interest, that I know of, is its having been built under Horace Walpole's directions, when he was once staying here with Sir Richard's father. It is not pretty inside, Mr. Faulconbridge. There is, however,

a view from it. I will go as far with you. It isn't ten minutes' walk, and I am in no hurry."

"Why does Sir Richard keep it so strictly locked?" and Faulconbridge's eyes sought the answer in Lady Trevelyan's face rather than in her words. She replied, with perfect simplicity,—

"I believe, because the Stourbridge people who come and picnic in the park, used to get into 'Lady Margaret's Folly,' as it is called, and did damage there, so my uncle locked it up. He dislikes the place exceedingly himself, and never goes near it. No one does, indeed, and were it not out of respect to his mother's memory, Sir Richard would pull it down, I think."

"Perhaps, there may be some ugly story connected with it?"

"Oh, it is the very reverse of romantic," said his companion, laughing. "It is the sort of place Queen Charlotte and Miss Burney might have drunk tea in. I assure you it will not inspire you in any way. You mustn't expect it. It is simply the ugly kind of thing our grandfathers thought classical and picturesque."

They turned into one of the straight alleys which Lady Margaret had adorned, some seventy years before, with stone statues; now moss-grown, and with here and there the loss of a finger, or toe. A very affected Cupid, with his eyes bound, pulled a broken bow at all who entered his precincts. Round the waist of a pretty Psyche, not far off, a trail of ivy had clasped itself: Mars had very evidently been in the wars, and a weather-stained Bacchus looked as though he had emptied over himself the cup he was raising to his laughing lips. The dripping of sycamore-boughs above a rush-crowned River-God had sent year after year the long trickling moisture over his breast and shoulders; the lichens had ripened Pomona's apples into gold, and tinged Pan's hairy hoofs with grey. At the farther end of the walk, where it terminated in "Lady Margaret's Folly," the sculptor had abandoned the region of mythology, and had grouped round the peristyle sundry Virtues, typical, no doubt, of all the noble lady, his patroness, might be supposed to possess. Here Charity, with her numerous breasts, turned benignantly toward Justice, blindfold with her

scales; and Chastity, in a high wind, with agitated drapery of the Bernini school, had much ado to guard her lamp from being blown out.

"Love at one end and Justice at the other," exclaimed Faulconbridge, with a laugh. "I am not surprised at Sir Richard's never frequenting this walk. It is evident these statues were not erected by *him*. By-the-by, what a fortunate thing it is they are both blindfold. There would be something tantalizing in the impossibility of their ever reaching each other, and being reconciled—the artist stuck them at a suspiciously long distance apart."

"Love is placed at the entrance of the walk, meaning, evidently, that every one who approached the sanctuary of its deity, Lady Margaret, was to be struck by Love's arrows. It is not exactly according to our taste, to indicate any one's perfections by allegorical figures round a summer-house; but in that day, no doubt, it was thought a triumph of refined compliment, and really, I believe, it was as sincere and as well-merited in my grandmother's case, as it ever could be."

Faulconbridge did not reply. Either inten-

tionally or not, the lady had missed the obvious point of his satirical remark. As they came near the Virtues, however, standing in a little sun-lit space round the building, free from the drip of over-hanging boughs, and the corroding moisture of vegetation, he said gravely,—

"I pray you to observe that *Justice* is the only figure, whether of Gods or Graces, that has not suffered at the hands of Time, here. You saw how Love had been shattered? shall we take it as an omen, that Justice survives Love, and shall be omnipotent over everything, sooner or later?"

"You will find that *Charity* has not suffered more than Justice," replied the lady, with emphasis. "Here, where Heaven's pure light and air can get to them, none have suffered much. It is so in life, I think. The more we can make our deeds fair and open before men, the less of mystery and darkness we shroud them with, the better. Look at this amusing specimen of the taste of our ancestors," she added, pointing to a small marble tablet let into the wall of the building. "This was erected to my grandmother's

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spoke very distinctly of the day in which it was raised, and its position would have redeemed a worse structure. But the interior was certainly cold and uninviting. A spinet or harpsichord stood in one corner, and a pile of very musty old music-books were ranged upon it. Faulconbridge took up one. The name of "Lady Margaret Stourton" in gilt letters on a label of red morocco was outside; inside were old-fashioned sonatas of Clementi's, and concertos of Viotti's, and songs from forgotten operas full of wonderful turns and trills, with the pencil-marks yet visible from hands long since still. The decoration of the walls had been supposed to be Pompeian once, but the paint had been peeling from them for many a year. A table of English *marqueterie*, with very high thin legs, stood in the middle of this dreary chamber, and on the mantel-shelf were ranged some jars of old Indian china. Except a few straight-backed chairs, there was absolutely nothing else. A periwinkle had grown up unbidden round one of the windows, and was now staring with its blue eyes straight into the room, and this was the only

sign of life left about the deserted temple known as "Lady Margaret's Folly."

But to Faulconbridge, at least, it was not without attraction, for he walked up and down examining everything, even opening the old spinet, and passing his fingers over its rusted strings, moved thereto, as it should seem, by some strange interest and curiosity.

Lady Trevelyan watched him for several minutes. His brow was knit, his face pale.

At last he came up to her.

"I am somewhat imaginative," he said. "This place is by no means as uninteresting to me as you imagined. It is just suited to a scene I have been rehearsing in my own mind: I people it with the actors in a drama which I am studying. I pictured the scene much like this, and it realizes my idea—a grim place for the perpetration of a dark deed."

"Is it a play in which you are going to appear?" asked the lady.

"Yes; a play which was acted many years ago, and is quite unknown or forgotten. I am about to revive it."

"It must be very exciting from the expression of your face; will you repeat this scene to me, Mr. Faulconbridge?"

"No—no; not to-day. I have not fully made up my mind yet, as to the part I shall play. Some day or other you shall hear it."

"Do you always throw yourself with this vehemence into the parts you perform? You are quite pale."

"I do nothing by halves. When I act I become the man I represent for the time being. When I hate, I should satisfy Dr. Johnson by hating most cordially. When I *love*——"

"Well, Mr. Faulconbridge? You hesitate."

"It is folly for a man to talk about love, unless he is making an avowal." And he turned away. "If walls could only speak, sometimes!" he exclaimed, after a pause, as he walked up and down the room once more. "Think what strange secrets they might often disclose! What love, what treachery, and crime perhaps, even these four walls might bear witness to! Who knows?"

"I have always been accused of an undue

amount of imagination," said Lady Trevelyan, laughing, "but I never fancied this extremely ugly little building the scene of anything more exciting than an afternoon tea-party, with Lady Margaret for the central figure, in white with a blue riband and black spencer and powdered hair, as in Romney's picture, surrounded by her children, perhaps, and two or three Italian musicians in periwigs. And I hear the spinet's little wiry sound going on, and the twang of a harp, and a voice singing one of Mr. Haydn's last compositions. It is a pretty picture, and I see it all very distinctly, but there is nothing moving or tragic about it."

"We don't always know where the tragic intersects the light and frivolous in life. Even in such a scene as you describe might lie the germs of powerful emotion. Is there not a perpetual drama going on every day round us? Under all the gaiety and laughter in the great house down there, do you think that no human passions are concealed? The struggles of ambition and vanity, the wounds of jealousy and disappoint-

ment, above all, the secret stings of conscience, Lady Trevelyan—there is very little reality, very little happiness, perhaps, under all those masks."

"Perhaps not; but I trust every one is not a prey to these. I quite agree with you that society is very hollow work, and that it is utterly impossible to say what goes on underneath. But there are some people who are wise enough to cultivate happiness—to make the most of every small pleasure, and not to suffer themselves to be depressed by outward things, nor to take a gloomy view of their fellow-creatures. Such are truly wise, in my opinion."

"You speak as one who has not been tried, Lady Trevelyan. You live in a higher and purer atmosphere than most of those around you. The agonies of a petty vanity are as far removed from you as those of a troubled conscience, and in your peaceful, tranquil world, happiness no doubt *is* attainable. In the troubled waters I have lived so much in, with suffering, poverty, injustice, round me, it is harder. Goodness may exist, and energy, and all the noblest qualities

that grace human nature, but *happiness*—no: that can only be 'cultivated,' as you call it, under favourable circumstances."

There was something morbid and unpleasing to his companion, in this young man's words. If he had suffered in much, he had at least much for which he ought to be thankful. As they left the Temple, she said,—

"You have youth, and health, and talents, and are blessed with a very charming wife. If, under these conditions, you allow yourself to be depressed by poverty, or other outward circumstances, allow me to say the fault is your own."

"If a man has a heart at all, he must *feel*, Lady Trevelyan—feel bitterly and wrathfully, or sorrowfully, according to his temperament—any great wrong which has overshadowed the lives of those dearest to him. You will admit that this is an 'outward circumstance' which justifies a man's not feeling perfectly happy?"

"I do," she said, gently. "But if that man's heart incline him to wrath and bitterness, let him remember that there is nothing so likely to cause

the stings of conscience you speak of, as the unrestrained indulgence of these feelings. The man who can forgive an injury is, at least, nearer being happy than the man who is burning to resent one."

"It is not every one who can forgive. It may be a duty we owe to the dead to expose the wicked, and further the ends of justice——"

"I would again remind you,"—she interrupted him, with a smile,—"that *Charity* has stood the test of time here, quite as well as *Justice*, and is certainly the nobler and more God-like virtue of the two."

They had reached a cross-alley at the farther end of which Faulconbridge descried a gay party coming towards them. He bore straight forward so as to avoid them. Lady Trevelyan had her eyes bent upon the ground; she saw no one, but walked on with her companion, who was now silent, turning over in his mind her last words. A few minutes more brought them to the house.

CHAPTER II.

GOSSIP IN A COUNTRY HOUSE.

On the Thursday evening Bradley Ferrers returned.

Lady Trevelyan was waiting anxiously to speak to him upon a subject which was causing her some disquietude. It pained her to see that George's admiration of Mrs. Faulconbridge was now openly discussed and joked about among the guests at Stourton Towers. Not only the active malice of Mrs. Bailey, the scurrility of Carton, the "chaffing" of the young men, proclaimed how conspicuous it had become: the very servants, she knew, had begun to animadvert upon it. It was impossible to think ill of that sweet, modest-looking creature, but the position in which she was placed, and which she certainly did not

seem to shun, grieved Lady Trevelyan. She demurred to herself what she should do. In the course of that evening, she drew Ferrers aside.

"I want to speak to you," she said, "about your friend and his wife. There is a great deal about him I like; he is an odd character, but I confess he interests me. There is one thing, however, I do *not* like at all, and I can't understand. He doesn't seem to mind George's making himself so exceedingly conspicuous, as he has been doing, with that young and pretty wife of his. You know how good-natured people are! It annoys me to hear what is said. Can't you give him a hint?"

"Faulconbridge is not a man for hints, my dear Lady Trevelyan. If I speak at all, I must speak plainly: in which case you must be prepared to find that he has packed up his things to-morrow morning, and has taken himself and his wife off. His is one of those natures that has no idea of a petty jealousy, where confidence has once been given. If once *shaken*, it would be a terrible outburst. I confess that some fear

of this occurred to me before I went away, but they will be here for so few days, that I think it hardly worth while to interfere. Still, if you wish it——"

He paused; but Lady Trevelyan said nothing for nearly a minute, and when she did speak, it was with some hesitation.

"I hardly like to say to you what I feel about it. I may be wrong—quite wrong. Mrs. Faulconbridge seems so innocent and so far from being a coquette, that I cannot believe my own instincts; and yet they tell me every hour of the day that she is not insensible to George's admiration; that she does nothing to discourage it; that—that—in short, I certainly think it most unwise of her husband to throw her so much in the boy's way. As to the pretence of rehearsals, it is all nonsense. Perhaps your friend does not know how censorious the world is, especially to an actress. He has lived too much abroad to know much of our conventionalities; and for this, if for no better reason, I think some one ought to tell him."

"So be it," replied Ferrers. "The task you give me is not a very pleasant one, but I will perform it. If he departs, as I fully expect, you must explain the fact in your own way to Sir Richard and George."

"You think I am too scrupulous? Of course, my uncle is rather pleased than otherwise to see this flirtation going on; but I cannot help fearing it is more serious than he imagines. I certainly never saw George so much taken with any one yet. When I suggested this to Sir Richard, he only laughed, and said George had very good taste. Now, however, that they are to remain a week longer here, I am not happy about it. Still, as your friends, Mr. Ferrers, I must leave you to act in the matter according to your own judgment. Men and women see these things differently. It is only the extreme youth and inexperience of this young couple that——"

"Say no more, Lady Trevelyan; I'll speak to him. One learns such an abominable amount of caution in my profession that one forgets how necessary it is occasionally to commit some act

of egregious folly in a friend's behalf, for which he certainly will not thank one."

He laughed in his odd, jerky way; and, as Sir Richard called to him at that moment to make up a fourth at a rubber of whist, the conversation ended there.

But Bradley Ferrers' opinion of the inexpediency of attaching undue importance to the frivolous or scandalous gossip of a country house was unpleasantly confirmed before the evening was over. The whist-table happened to be near a sofa occupied by Mrs. Bailey, and it was possible to hear very large fragments of a most unedifying conversation carried on between Carton and that lady. Ferrers tried to shut his ears as long as he possibly could, and he played his hand with a moderate amount of steadiness, until Lady Trevelyan's name, uttered in Carton's sharp, rasping treble, arrested Ferrers' attention, in spite of himself.

"It is amusing to see that dragon of virtue seduced into a flirtation, and with an actor, too! a man twenty years younger than herself, and

married! The whole thing is perfect, ain't it, Mrs. Bailey?"

"Some women have such low tastes!" rejoined the lady.

"When a woman won't accept a compliment from a man in her own station, it's always suspicious," continued Carton. "'Pon my life, I said something uncommonly civil to her the other day about a mole on her neck, and I thought she'd have eaten me."

"Mr. Ferrers," cries Lady Bideford, "you revoked, sir: you had the queen after all."

Ferrers is covered with confusion, as with a garment, and, while he apologizes, loses two or three sentences that have passed behind him. The first words that he hears again are,—

"—perfectly clear that the young *parvenu's* head is turned by the attention of a woman of her rank. Just look at him, Mrs. Bailey! Gad! it's a pity his wife ain't a jealous woman. He! he!"

"She is otherwise employed. It is quite disgusting the way in which she lays herself out to attract Mr. Stourton. But when one lets

that sort of people into one's house, what can one expect? As to Lady Trevelyan, it is quite refreshing to find that so very *superior* a woman can be guilty of a flirtation! and in such a stately way, too; it is really quite a lesson to one! We met them alone together yesterday in the most secluded part of the park, so deep in sentiment that they did not even see us! Don't you hate superior women, and the airs they give themselves, Mr. Carton?"

What that gentleman's reply was, Ferrers never heard.

"Mr. Ferrers, do you hear? It is your deal, and we are waiting," shrieked Lady Bideford, and while he began scattering the cards recklessly, Mrs. Bailey was asked to sing, and the conversation with Carton came to an abrupt close.

When the ladies had retired an hour later, Ferrers led Faulconbridge into the library, where they were secure from interruption.

"You are new to this life, so you have not yet found out that the most infernal place for gossip in the world is an English country house. You

have a young and very pretty wife, my dear fellow, and every woman whom George Stourton speaks to he is supposed to be in love with. There is the plain, unadorned truth. Now, as I know, and you know, and your wife knows how utterly absurd all this is, it is a question for you to decide whether George shall be told that he must not make his admiration of Mrs. Faulconbridge—perfectly innocent though it be—quite so conspicuous."

To Ferrers' great surprise, Faulconbridge laughed; not long, or loud, but a pleasant little laugh, as he replied,—

"So really the heir of Stourton can't rehearse his love-scenes with my poor little Nina (who is paid for this special purpose), but he is supposed to be enacting them in earnest, is he? What a thing it is, to be so vastly important a personage, that all the mammas and marriageable girls watch a man's every movement, every glance of his eye! It is almost a pity he is such a good fellow as he is, Ferrers. The more I see him, the better I like him, and I don't feel the least afraid of trusting Nina in his society, as you may tell all our

amiable friends." "I have learnt," he added more sharply, "never to consider the world's opinion in matters that concern my real happiness, and that of those I love. I have a contempt for its judgments, which I see capriciously pronounced (and often reversed), upon the most paltry grounds. Therefore, except in perfectly indifferent matters, I never trouble my head to consult the world's opinion. In this case, poor little Nina would be rendered very uncomfortable during the remainder of our stay here, were I to reveal to her the good-natured remarks that have been made; I should completely paralyze her from acting naturally, when the night came; and I should make her miserable in the meantime. If you, or any one else, choose to speak to Mr. Stourton, of course you are at liberty to do so; but, remember, I have nothing to say to it."

"It is strange," thought Bradley Ferrers to himself that night as, in the solitude of his own room, he sat staring at the embers, for a full hour, before getting into bed. "It is strange. I thought Faulconbridge would have taken the thing in such

a different way. I expected him to have fired up, and that we should have had a deuce of a row before he was pacified. He is a queer fish! What can be the meaning of his utter indifference? Can it be that he is so accustomed to the freedom of Italian manners as to think lightly of the solemn obligations of marriage? Can it—can it possibly be—as that scurrilous old brute to-night suggested—that—that Faulconbridge is not insensible to the charm of that peerless woman's society? that he *is* insensible to every other consideration so that he can pass a few days longer under the same roof with her? No! It is preposterous—it can't be—in his position, and with that young wife—absurd! But I'm afraid I have acted like a fool in bringing these people to Stourton Towers. I have an uncomfortable feeling that their being here will lead to trouble of some kind."

It was very long before Bradley Ferrers fell asleep that night. The resolution he came to, before sleep at last visited his eyelids, we shall learn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III.

A REVELATION.

"WILL you take a turn with me in the shrubbery, Lady Trevelyan, before I sit down to my work?" asked the lawyer, after breakfast. There was something less of ease in his manner than usual, and Lady Trevelyan observed that he looked pale and worn. She took her garden cloak and hat from a stand in the hall, and they walked out together upon the terrace.

"Well! did you speak to your friend, last night?"

"I did—and the result was not at all what I expected. He treated the matter with perfect unconcern: and didn't even seem angry to hear that his wife's name was mixed up in any gossip. He spoke highly of George; and said he should

certainly not make his wife uncomfortable by speaking to her on the subject; so, as he is satisfied, there is an end of the matter, I suppose."

Lady Trevelyan was silent for a minute or two.

"I am afraid your friend is selfish and heartless at the bottom, after all. I cannot conceive a man, with a grain of honour, indifferent to what is said about his wife; such a young creature as that is, too! His morals are too Italian to please me."

"I confess his conduct puzzles me; but he is not heartless. His contempt for the world's opinion is unwise: and when he has lived some years longer in it, he will find that it is *he*, and not society, who is a sufferer by this folly; but with all his faults, he is not heartless. Do you know what this stupid gossip has put very strongly before me, Lady Trevelyan? Do you know what I have keenly felt in hearing the names of—of young and attractive women coarsely bandied about by such men as Carton?" His manner was more short and fidgety than usual, and a spot of colour rose upon the high sallow cheek-bones as he went on: "I have felt keenly the disadvantages of

a woman having no legally constituted protector on such occasions. I have felt that the safeguard of an honest man's arm and name—even though he be inferior to his wife in every respect—is worth something—is not, perhaps, to be despised. Though Faulconbridge treats the tongue of slander so lightly, yet *he is there* to avenge any insult to his wife. Would not her position be infinitely more painful here, if she stood alone?"

He paused: and Lady Trevelyan walked slowly on, without a word. She knew what was coming: she had guessed it all along. Would she have staved it off if she could? She had asked herself something very like that question only a few days before, without any very definite reply. Now she had no hesitation; but she judged it better and kinder, in the state of nervous excitement into which she saw Bradley had worked himself, to let him say, once and for ever, all he would have said, with any encouragement, long and long before.

"Dear Lady Trevelyan, why do I say this to you?" he went on, in a thick hurried voice. "I am not a fool. I know it is impossible you should

love me, in the romantic sense of the word. Nature hasn't favoured me in many ways. I've no delightfulness of any kind to take a woman's heart. But you have given me too many proofs of your regard, for me to forget them. If—*if* it is remotely possible that you could make up your mind to marry such a fellow as I am, the devotion of my life, I do firmly believe, might atone to you for the absence of brilliant qualities in me, and make you, God willing, a happy woman. You have known me now for some years. You are not likely to be deceived in me: my infirmities, be they small or great, are not hid from you. Nor can my love be so completely, Lady Trevelyan, though I have struggled hard not to betray my secret. I have felt the hopelessness of my passion. I resolved that it should not interfere with our friendship, and for a long, long time, I have fought successfully. To-day, from a trifling cause, I have let the barrier be broken down. Can you forgive me?"

His voice shook, and his head was bent a little, as he shambled on, hitting at the brambles and

dead ferns with his great thick stick, while the other hand was shoved far into his old morning coat-pocket. In the man's words and demeanour, how few would have recognized the shrewd, self-contained lawyer — the rising man at the bar, whom a certain small portion of the world already regarded as an oracle!

Lady Trevelyan laid her hand tenderly upon his arm.

"I value your friendship beyond any I have in the world, dear Mr. Ferrers. There is no one into whose hands I would so confidently entrust the happiness of a daughter or sister. But, for myself, I have no intention of marrying again. I have outlived the power of loving, as I think a woman ought to love, who marries of her own free choice. I could give you nothing more than I give you now, my very warm and true friendship; therefore, let us forget this, and return upon the old lines, unchanged, as though this had not been."

He wrung the hand that rested still upon his arm, in silence. He could not trust himself to

speak; but a minute later, where two paths crossed, he turned abruptly to the left, and, thrusting his wide-awake farther over his eyes, walked quickly away.

Lady Trevelyan looked after him with an expression of almost remorse; then, with slow steps among the brown leaves and budding primroses, followed the path before her, until she found herself upon her favourite terrace, overlooking the home-park, where we first saw her walking.

She was sorry for what had just happened. She had not in the least over-stated her regard for Bradley Ferrers; and she was aware that, however she might try to return to the old footing, there must be, for a long time at least, a shadow rising up between them. It is idle to talk about such words as had now passed being forgotten at once, by either man or woman. Time alone can soften the effect of them; and the stronger the friendship, the more difficult is it to return to habits of unconstraint, when that one minute is come and gone which renders every

word spoken afterwards a matter of calculation and scrutiny. There was no man in her own family whom she could consult as she had been in the habit of consulting Ferrers; and such consultation she felt would now, of necessity, be more reserved than heretofore. The loss to herself would be great; but she was far more grieved for her friend, who was a man not lightly to make the avowal he had just made, nor lightly to brood over the destruction of his hopes. It must have cost him a great effort to say those few words; she had no fear that they would ever be repeated. Poor, honest Bradley! Had it crossed her mind—for one instant, no longer—that it might be wiser for her to accept that firm and faithful friend's guardianship through what remained of life, without the justification of any warmer feeling? If so, she never repented of the answer she had given.

At the end of the terrace, she found Faulconbridge seated on the wall, smoking his cigar. Perhaps she would as soon have been alone at that moment, but, as it was, she bethought herself that the opportunity was favourable for ad-

ministering in person the salutary advice which had so signally failed of its effects from Bradley's hands.

"Why is not Mrs. Faulconbridge out this lovely morning? You are selfishly indulging the beauties of nature by yourself, Mr. Faulconbridge, when I am sure a turn would do your wife good."

"She is rehearsing with Mr. Stourton."

"I must really speak to George about keeping her such a prisoner. It is not fair, in any way. She is so young and pretty that the world will say all sorts of things. When you are as old as I am, Mr. Faulconbridge, you will learn how necessary it is to consult, to a certain degree, what the world says."

Faulconbridge looked annoyed.

"Nothing a man hates more than to have his youth thrown in his teeth. I've had enough to harden me into the worldly wisdom of forty years at least, and I desire no more experience to teach me that this is a world full of evil-speaking, lying, and slandering. But, for that very reason, unless

it is to serve my own ends in some way, I attach no importance whatever to its voice—nor shall I do so, if I live to be a hundred."

"I am sorry for it," replied Lady Trevelyan, coldly. "Age, which robs so much from us, has only one thing to give in return—the wisdom of experience. It is sometimes dearly bought. The misfortune of youth, about which you seem so sensitive, will speedily cure itself, but the effect of its thoughtless contempt of the world's opinion may be lasting."

"Yes, it *may* be lasting."

He smiled somewhat bitterly, and threw away the end of his cigar, as he went on,—

"It may be lasting, but what of that? A couple of players, Lady Trevelyan—how can the world's opinion affect us? When we once take the fatal plunge, and see our names in letters three feet long upon the walls, it is of very little importance what the world will say, provided we amuse them. The procedures of law are reversed in the case of actors: we are all looked upon as monsters of iniquity, unless we can make ourselves

the fashion, when it is astonishing how the funds of our respectability will suddenly rise."

"Your cynicism is unjust, for the stage in our own day shows the different consideration in which those who have a title to our respect are held from those who have none. However, if you have so little human sympathy as to care nothing for what your fellow men and women think, remembering that the judgment of the wisest is influenced, in a measure, by the voice of rumour, I have nothing to say."

"I am indifferent to the opinion of the crowd. The few who care for me, and whose opinion I care for, will not be influenced in their regard by anything the world can say."

"How if they think your conduct really reprehensible?"

He turned almost fiercely round.

"Why should they? A man is only answerable to his own conscience. If he can be satisfied that his motives are justifiable——"

"There is something more than that. As every action has consequences to others, of perhaps

infinite importance, it is not sufficient to justify our *motives* to ourselves. There is a story of an innocent man who would not escape from prison because he knew that his gaoler would be executed."

"If that man had been living under a great injustice for years—if every man's hand had been against his, and he had found it necessary to put forth his own hand against every man in self-defence—he would not have been so scrupulous!"

"You do not speak," said Lady Trevelyan, sadly, "like the same man who talked of his childhood the other day with such tenderness. I should not have thought you had *ever* known much love, still less that you were now blessed with that of a fair young wife."

"Lady Trevelyan," he said, abruptly, "do you only like those to whom you can accord your esteem? The last I know you won't accord *me*. You think I am an unprincipled beggar, who am only consulting my own selfish ease and pleasure. Will you suspend your judgment of me for a while? Will you try and not hate me in the meantime? I said just now I cared for the

opinion of very few; among those, though you may think my words to you have not sounded like it, there is no one whose opinion I should so grieve to think was forfeited for ever as yourself."

The change in his manner was so sudden, from its violent and somewhat arrogant self-justification to an almost passionate tone of supplication, that Lady Trevelyan was moved to say—

"I judge no one, Mr. Faulconbridge. I have ventured, as a much older woman, to offer you in a friendly spirit a word of advice. I am not the least offended that you do not see fit to follow it, though I am sorry; for I can conceive no reason that can justify your braving the world's opinion about what is, after all, a thing of no importance. No one who looks in your wife's face can ever doubt that she is the most pure-minded young creature—fearless in her innocence—that ever stepped the earth. But as this is no guarantee against envy and malice, I warn you fairly that she may be rendered uncomfortable before her stay here comes to an end, by all the refinements of ill-nature, if my cousin's

attentions continue to be so very openly expressed. Pardon me, if I have spoken to you with great freedom. I promise you that it is the last time I shall do so. I have spoken as a friend: you must now follow your own course."

"Continue to be my friend," replied Faulconbridge, with the same softened manner, as he took the hand, in its brown garden glove, that hung beside him. "You shall lecture me as much as you like, and though there are things I cannot explain, cannot argue with you, and justify in my conduct now, if you will not abandon me, you shall see how docile and patient I shall become in time."

Lady Trevelyan withdrew her hand with a smile.

"I cannot say the first lesson is promising, Mr. Faulconbridge; but I will not abandon you, as you are pleased to call it. I hope we shall continue friends. Here is the house—are you coming in?"

"Promise me one thing, Lady Trevelyan; whatever you see, whatever you hear, in the

course of the next few days, you will not judge me *hastily*. I am not so careless and impetuous, perhaps, as you imagine. Whether right or wrong, I have reasons for what I do."

He had stopped dead short at the door of the conservatory to say these words, and without further reply from Lady Trevelyan, who regarded this mysterious language as a kind of stage slang, and attached no importance to it, they now entered the house by this way.

The conservatory opened into the drawing-room, and facing the glass door was a mirror, which reached to the floor, reflecting the brilliant perspective of camelias and azaleas opposite. The optical delusion of walking into a second conservatory was destroyed at this moment by the fact of Sir Richard Stourton's being in front of the mirror, engaged in the contemplation of a long stain of coffee which he had just discovered, traversing the ample surface of his canary-coloured waistcoat.

"Gad! these modern breakfast-cups are the very deuce! I must change my waistcoat. Diana,

is that you? I've a letter from Lichfield. Lady Sarah can't come, but he brings the girl."

"I didn't know you had asked them again. I thought they had refused?"

"That was last week. *I have reasons for*—— Oh! Mr. Faulconbridge, I did not see you. Hum!—you will find George, sir, ranting away in the library with Miss Skipton and Mrs. Faulconbridge. Gad! I expect he will take to the stage himself."

Lady Trevelyan started. Those very simple words, "*I have reasons for*"—struck her ear while she was not looking at her uncle. It was an odd coincidence that they were almost the last Faulconbridge had uttered. She looked up, and caught Sir Richard's wrinkled face in the glass as he addressed the actor.

And she saw at the same instant the young and handsome face behind him.

What was it made her start so violently?

She hurried from the room, and running up to her own boudoir, double-locked the door, and flung herself pale and agitated into a chair.

"Am I going mad? What is this strange fancy that has suddenly seized me? The expression of those two faces, for a single moment, as I caught them in the glass, seemed to me to be actually identical! Is my imagination really running away with me, as poor Trevelyan used to say it did? Or is there really some dark and terrible mystery under all this? That young man's face haunts me. What does his conduct mean? His strange language, which I thought foolish and inflated, has it some deeper meaning under it? His singular behaviour in Sir Richard's room, and again in the summer-house two days ago—above all, the look I intercepted on his face just now——"

Until the luncheon-bell rang, Diana Trevelyan sat there, a prey to conflicting thoughts and fancies. Then hastily rising, she bathed her face and hands, and went downstairs.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. PENDARVES IS REJECTED.

THE next day, Saturday, brought three accessions to the party—Mr. Lichfield and his daughter, from the other end of the county, and a college friend of George's, Barnet by name. Of the first-named gentleman, it is only necessary to say that he was supposed to be the most "influential" man in the county, having a larger number of votes than any other landed proprietor, and being, moreover, nearly connected through his wife with the present ministry. I do not anticipate being obliged to report a single word that he uttered during the days he spent at Stourton Towers, so that it is useless to trouble the reader with the description of an entirely commonplace man. His daughter we must say something about.

Miss Lichfield was handsome—upon a big scale. People said there was a certain propriety in this, as she was such a big heiress. She was very stupid, having been educated to that frightful extent when the intellect seems to have been jammed into a vice, and to have lost all power of free play. There never could be a fault found with her dress, or her grammar. She was good-humoured, blameless, uninteresting; the last person in the world to suit George Stourton; and the one card which, with persistent patience, Sir Richard periodically tried to force upon his nephew after failing to insinuate into his hand half a dozen other eligible cards in succession. Mr. Lichfield, it was clear, would not object to the match; the lady herself, it was thought, had a mild inclination for the young ex-guardsman. That gentleman alone showed no kind of disposition to make her an offer of his hand and heart. Yet still, twice a year or so, Sir Richard persevered in thrusting forward this same card, while George as pertinaciously waved it away.

John Barnet was four-and-twenty, and had just taken deacon's orders. He certainly was not particularly suited to the Church; but then his father had a good living in his gift, and had three other sons. John had never been vicious at Oxford, only rather extravagant, and was endowed with an amount of physical strength and animal spirits which had thrown him naturally among boating and boxing, rather than with reading men. He certainly ran no risk of unsettling his orthodoxy by the study of German mysticism, the fascinations of Romanism, or by running on to the fashionable quicksands of scientific inquiry. Without much inquiry, perhaps, of any kind, he accepted, and was prepared to teach what he had received. He was not much given to study. How he crammed enough to pass his "little-go" was a surprise to his friends. He won a steeple-chase that same week, and returned to the bosom of his family with a black eye in consequence. He was up to anything in the way of fun; always good-tempered, always ready to oblige: and if there were clergymen who justly inspired more

respect among their parishioners, I am certain there was none more popular.

Sir Richard was not partial to his nephew's friend. He had a great idea of what he called the "dignity of the Church" (though he seldom went there himself), and John's jokes and his laughter were a perpetual blister to the baronet. There are people who are not fond of seeing others in high spirits—Sir Richard was one of them. But he yielded, as he did in everything, to George's request that John Barnet might be invited. He could not come for the theatricals on the day they were originally fixed to take place, which Sir Richard had been glad of, but he had come now, in time, after all, to lend them the hearty encouragement of his lungs and hands.

Faulconbridge was with George when his friend was announced, and he was amused at the greeting between the two.

"Halloa! old fellow, how are you? By Jove! what a size you've grown! You do nothing but feed and gossip with old women, I suppose, now, eh? Well, I'm glad you've come at last: we've

wanted the countenance of the Church terribly; we've been awfully slow here, old boy. Allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. Faulconbridge."

John Barnet bowed.

"Well, Georgey, I am sorry to see you laid up, though. They tell me you've had a cropper."

"Oh, it's nothing to signify; in two or three days I shall be able to walk as well as ever. But, upon my life, I don't mind lying here a bit with pleasant society all day long."

"What a fellow you are for society! What would you do if you had to lead an anchorite's life like me in my new curacy?"

"Tell us what sort of a place it is. Fancy you in the pulpit! By Jove! I should like to hear you, Jack."

"Ah, if you only did, just! you'd amend your ways, Master Georgey, for the remainder of your natural existence. I make my sermons short—uncommonly short—and sweet—uncommonly sweet; and then I send them out of church with the taste in their mouth, as fast as they like. They tell me I've a larger congregation than my predecessor

already—only think of that, old boy! The first Sunday, the clerk, who has a stunning voice, tried to cut in after the sermon with a hymn—as if the service wasn't long enough already! But I was beforehand with him, and was down on them with the blessing like a shot!"

"Jack," laughed his friend, "when are you going to be married? It is the only thing wanting to complete you as a model parson."

"No chaffing! I'm not a pampered scion of the aristocracy like you, who have only to pick and choose. Who would be fool enough to marry *me*, with a hundred and eighty pounds a year?"

"We've got the very thing for you here, my dear fellow, and you'll be conferring such an infinite obligation on me. The article arrives this very evening—a girl with a hundred thousand pounds, and uncommonly good-looking for the money into the bargain. *C'est votre affaire.*"

"Ho! ho! a recommendation of Sir Richard's you want to get rid of? I see. Well, I should be happy to oblige you, but do you think my personal attractions are such as to let me go in and win

your heiress in a canter? I believe I wasn't a bad-looking fellow till I shaved, but my strength, like Samson's, lay in my hair."

He passed his hand, with a whimsical expression, over the shining blue surface, which, until lately, had been clothed with a thick black beard. As Faulconbridge left the room, Barnet said,—

"Who is that? There is the man to win your heiress, I should think. What wonderful eyes the fellow has!"

"He is already provided," said George, rather shortly. "His wife acts for us here."

A few days ago he would have expatiated upon Mrs. Faulconbridge's charms. Now, he said nothing; but changed the subject at once, and began discussing the merits of the Oxford Eleven.

This was the first day George appeared at dinner since his accident. His spirits seemed rather forced; and once or twice, he lapsed into absent and silent fits, from which he evidently only roused himself by a great effort. He derived some satisfaction, however, from having introduced Barnet to Miss Skipton, to hand in to dinner, with

a significant nudge, calculated to mislead the clerical mind as to the identity of that lady with the possessor of the hundred thousand pounds. It was dusk in the drawing-room, then; and the expression of John Barnet's face when the blaze of dinner-table wax-lights revealed the spinster's over-mature charms, afforded George infinite amusement. Not less so, the undaunted manner in which the jolly young curate "went in" for making himself agreeable, and how he laughed, and what good stories he told, and with what alacrity the supposititious heiress responded. To do honest John justice, he would have taken as much trouble to amuse old Lady Granfield (who was dozing opposite, between the courses), but of course George affected to believe afterwards that his friend had been "making the running" with the three per cents. in view.

The real heiress was seated by George at dinner; he was told to hand her in; he could not help himself: but Faulconbridge, who was on the other side, exerted himself so unusually to be agreeable, that George was spared the bore of talk-

ing to her. Lady Trevelyan happened to be next him; and as Lord Granfield, who was beyond again, plunged, in the second course, into a dreary discussion about a disfranchised borough with Mr. Lichfield and Sir Richard, the two cousins had a few minutes' uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*. Up to this moment, George had been either quite silent, with eyes furtively wandering to where Bradley and Mrs. Faulconbridge sat together, at the farther end of the table, or else waking up to "chaff" his friend opposite, or to contradict Carton, and throw discredit on that gentleman's wonderful narratives.

"George, you are out of spirits this evening. What is the matter?"

"Nonsense, Di! I never felt jollier in my life. What makes you think that?"

"I can see it. Take care, dear boy. Take care what you are about."

George coloured up to the roots of his hair.

"What stuff you do talk! I beg pardon, Di—but you really are so imaginative and romantic."

"You have never known me imagine *this*

before, George. Remember your position here as regards that person—I will not mention her name; it is not manly of you to take advantage of it to—to injure her, perhaps very seriously; think of this."

He did think of it: perhaps he had been thinking of it more or less for the last hour; but he said nothing. He turned round and plunged into the discussion about the disfranchised borough; and the cousins exchanged no more words during dinner.

But during the whole of that evening—as Lady Trevelyan well remembered afterwards—George, by a resolute effort, kept aloof from Mrs. Faulconbridge. His avoidance of the sofa, at one end of the room, where Miss Lichfield, in white, turned over photographs, was hardly more marked than his avoidance of the sofa at the other end, where Mrs. Faulconbridge, in black, pursued the same occupation. His eyes, indeed, which never sought the former, were constantly wandering in the latter direction, but in every other respect, the restraint that he exercised over himself was

complete. He talked to Mrs. Bailey; he talked to good old Lady Granfield, and tiresome old Lady Bideford; he even came to Louis Granfield's rescue, who was seated speechless beside Lady Julia, and threw in a waif of conversation, which was feebly clutched at, and drifted away with his presence. There was the usual rubber, and the usual song from Mrs. Bailey, and Sir Richard watched his nephew with no very pleased eye, as George, after a good deal of mysterious joking with John Barnet, led his friend up to Miss Lichfield, and, introducing, left him to entertain her. Lady Trevelyan gave George great credit for his conduct altogether. She looked to see how Mrs. Faulconbridge would take it, and observed that she was pale, and that her large soft eyes had a troubled expression, as she lifted them from the book she held, every now and then, and glanced at her husband.

Faulconbridge sat by Lady Trevelyan the greater part of that evening. She felt she could not talk herself; but she could listen, and drop in a word occasionally, and try with all her woman's tact to

sound the depths of that strange, complicated character, which, in spite of her better judgment, had so unaccountable a fascination for her.

"He has married a doll," she said to herself in the course of that evening, "a pretty, harmless doll, quite unsuited to him, quite incapable of exercising any helpful influence over such a man. What might not a different sort of woman have effected? It is evident that he only regards her as a child—a bright, innocent child, with whom it is impossible to associate the idea of evil—but no *helpmate*, no friend and counsellor, as the wife of this man ought to be!"

Upon the subject of that strange likeness which she had fancied she detected in the morning, she was still puzzled, though she sought for it now in vain. It seemed to her that never were two faces so entirely *un*like, and she tried to make up her mind that the imaginary resemblance must have been owing to some accidental arrangement of light in the mirror. Still, like a painful dream, the recollection of the *impression* pursued her: she could not get rid of it.

The evening, to several of the guests, Bradley Ferrers among the number, seemed interminable. Barnet, being called on at last for some conjuring tricks, proved equal to the occasion, and roused the dormant faculties of the company. A year ago, he and George had entertained a party here by that grotesque trial of strength and balance known as "cock-fighting;" but it was since then he had taken deacon's orders, and a deacon rolling on the floor, he had been told, was unseemly. He thought it hard: but, as he said, "these are the sacrifices one makes." So he had turned his attention to palmistry, legerdemain, and like social accomplishments: and delighted in people's cries of astonishment when he produced cards out of his boots, and so on. His feats were interrupted this evening by the clock's striking eleven, and Millet's entrance with candles. He then, I believe, went and had a game of billiards; but George saw no more of him that night.

George saw no more of *him*,—but, as Lady Trevelyan learnt through her maid, Lacy, he had another companion closeted in his own room until

a late hour. Mrs. Pendarves, at a quarter to twelve, knocking at the young man's door, demanded admittance in the name of goulard lotion, plaster, and bandages. She opened the door. He was sitting with his head between his hands. Faulconbridge, with his back to the fire, stood opposite him.

"Whatever are you setting up for at this hour, Master George? it's high time you was in bed, sir: come, you get into bed at once, and let me put on your bandages."

"I won't have them to-night, Pendarves," he said, without raising his head. "Go away, please; it will do in the morning."

"Pack o' stuff, Master George! What's the use of paying for lotion and stuff, if you don't use it? I daresay you've never bin and taken those pills as I gave you last night? It ain't the part of any friend to come and keep you up, jabbering here, when you ought to be a-bed," she added, looking at Faulconbridge with great severity.

"Do go away, there's a dear woman," replied George, with his face still between his hands.

And the incensed Mrs. Pendarves, going down the passage, bottle still in hand, with a tread to which just wrath lent additional weight, met the light-footed Lacy—at other times an object of the housekeeper's undisguised contempt. She now stopped her, much as one of Fritz's grenadiers may have challenged some effeminate young Prussian courtier to pass—at the peril of his life.

"Mrs. Lacy! here, ma'am; you go and tell her ladyship that it's my belief Mr. George is goin' out of his mind. He is sittin' there with his head in his hands, and that play-acting man there opposite him like a ghost, and he won't have no bandages nor no medicine, though it'll all have to be paid for; and he won't so much as look at one in the face. And this plaster which I'd spread so beautiful, too!"

"Well, it *is* beautiful!" observed Mrs. Lacy, admiringly. "How could you ever get it so smooth, Mrs. Pendarves?"

"I'm accustomed to them things," said the housekeeper, stonily; "but that's neither here nor

there. It's my belief, and you tell her ladyship so, that Mr. George will come to no good if he has them play-actors with him all day and all night too. It ain't Christian-like, that's what it ain't; it's like heathens and fureigners, and so I'll tell him to-morrow morning myself."

With this, she tramped solemnly down the passage, leaving the affrighted Lacy to convey the substance of the interview to her mistress.

Lady Trevelyan made no remark. But when her maid, bidding her mistress good-night, left the room, the latter went to the window, and, putting back the curtain, looked out on the North Tower opposite. In Edgar Faulconbridge's room all was black as the night itself. From his wife's window below there shone a light, and a woman's shadow crossed the blind now and then. At last that was put out, and then the tower, black and rayless, looked like a blot against the sky. She looked out once again before stepping into bed, but there was still no light in the upper room of the North Tower.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER ORDERS FOR INDIA.

GEORGE did not appear at breakfast next morning, but Faulconbridge and every other member of the party were duly assembled. The post-bag contained one letter important in its results to some of the actors in this story. It was marked "On Her Majesty's Service," and directed to George. It lay on a sideboard, unheeded—like many an event in life pregnant with consequence—until such time as George's breakfast should be taken up to him. Whether that misguided young man was, at this time, in the jaws—to speak metaphorically—of Mrs. Pendarves, I know not. If so, James no doubt produced a favourable diversion when he entered with the tray. Half an hour later, George appeared, looking rather pale, and carrying the

open letter in his hand; but by this time most of the party were gone to church. Sir Richard was alone as his nephew came up to him, and held out the letter.

"We're under orders to sail for India, sir, in ten days."

"Eh? what? God bless my soul! It is not possible! you're joking!"

Sir Richard dropped the *Observer* he was reading, and clutched the spectacles from his nose, without attempting to take the letter George held out.

"No joke, sir. It's perfectly true. I must join the end of the week."

Sir Richard said no more. He was not a man to betray any emotion; yet he felt this blow very keenly. Like many a selfish nature, he had identified himself with one particular object, upon which he had lavished all. If he were robbed of this—this *alter ego*—through whom his vanity received daily incense, by whom the pride of family and wealth was to be strengthened, for whom he schemed and manœuvred, as he had never taken the

trouble to do before for anything in his life—to have all his hopes and plans destroyed in an hour, was enough to shake even such nerves as Sir Richard Stourton's!

"I don't know why you shouldn't sell out, George?" he said, at last, but with a dry cough, and a certain hesitation that showed he was not quite easy in making the suggestion.

"*Sell out, sir!* I am sure you wouldn't wish me to do that. I've only been in the regiment two years. Besides, no fellow in the 20th Hussars would like to sell out when they're ordered on foreign service, especially when there's a *chance* of fighting. It's only the suddenness of it," he added, with a knit brow, "that I mind at all. Give me a month, and I should say, 'With all my heart.' I'd as soon be in India as anywhere for that matter."

Oh, these boys! What cruel wounds they thoughtlessly inflict. Sir Richard is not very thin-skinned, and yet he bleeds under those careless words. All the money he has spent upon this boy! Every whim gratified, every misde-

meanor condoned, and to hear him talk so coolly of being as happy in India as here!

But George is not thinking of his uncle, that is the fact. His thoughts are occupied with a very different subject. He would certainly never say a word to hurt his uncle, unless, indeed, such should be forced from him by circumstance. We have heard him once, in a manly straightforward way, undertake the baronet's defence. But the tie of gratitude and duty is like iron: strong, but cold to the touch.

Sir Richard at last rose, and having folded the letter which he had glanced at, returned it to his nephew, with that graceful dignity which was supposed to be peculiar to himself.

"I am going into my study. I shall be glad to see you there presently, if you can make it convenient to come. I have a matter of business to discuss with you, for which the general library is not the fitting place."

I don't think George paid much attention to this exordium. He was used to Sir Richard's pomposity; but a quarter of an hour later he

went to his uncle's room, as he was bid. The baronet was seated in the morocco chair before his table, upon which were some legal-looking documents. He pointed to a chair on the opposite side, which George took.

"You are aware that the bulk of this property is entailed upon you, as the next heir-at-law? I presume you are also aware, George, that the funded property, as well as all the Hursley Farm property, is all in my own power to dispose of as I think fit at—a—my death?"

George signified his cognizance of these facts.

"You are further, doubtless, aware that it is my wish and full intention to bequeath everything to you, provided you—a—fulfil my expectations, and act in conformity with my wishes. Having—a—no other near relation but yourself, this—a—I may say, seems the natural course for me to take. Now, George, you know how anxious I have been for some time past upon the subject of your marrying—of your making a *suitable* alliance, that is to say. I need hardly point out to you that the chief cause of my

impatience on this head, is the fact I have just stated of—a—having no near relation but yourself; so that—a—if anything were to happen to you, the title and estates would pass to some obscure connection whom I have never seen! It is, therefore, of the last importance that you should, without loss of time, choose a wife. The intelligence you have received this morning renders this necessity the more urgent. Your going out to India to fall a victim to the first pair of black eyes and neat ankles, George, isn't to be thought of. You must go out as an engaged man, if you are not positively married. You will be able to obtain leave, no doubt, in a few months, to return for your wife, and with this I suppose I must be satisfied."

"But who am I to marry, sir?"

Sir Richard coughed.

"Well, there is no lack of young ladies. I have myself suggested four or five to you. You need *not* marry for money; still, where it falls in your way, united to position and personal advantages, it is not amiss. The young lady

who is good enough to favour us with her company here at present, combines these recommendations, as you are aware."

"Which young lady?" George was determined not "to be aware" of anything that was not fully explained. His uncle replied rather sharply,

"Of course, I mean Miss Lichfield. Who could I mean else? Lady Katherine, whom I first thought of for you, is engaged: and I don't regret it now. She has become bony since last season."

"There's Lady Julia," observed his nephew, meditatively.

"She is plain in face, and deficient in intellect; but worse than this, she has no bust. It is a duty you owe to your family to choose a woman with a figure, George. You have, I presume, remarked that Miss Lichfield *has* a figure?"

George could not deny that that fact had been very apparent to him.

"I was concerned to observe last night that you took up that exceedingly noisy young friend of yours—who certainly ill supports the dignity

of the church in his general demeanour—and introduced him very pointedly to Miss Lichfield, while you yourself—a—paid her no attention the whole evening."

"I thought introducing such an amusing fellow as Jack Barnet was the prettiest attention I could pay her. And I'm sure she appreciated it, for she laughed at his stories, which she never did at any of mine."

"I have reason to believe the young lady is *not* ill-disposed towards you, George," said Sir Richard, encouragingly.

"Well, I don't want any one to be ill-disposed towards me," said George, feeling that he must at last speak out; "but as to the young lady, sir, I must fairly tell you, that nothing should induce me to marry her, if there was not another woman left in the world."

"Who, then, may I inquire, *do* you mean to marry?" Sir Richard sat erect in his chair. "Understand, George, the time for trifling is past. I consider it essential that this question should be settled before you leave England. I do not

mean to leave the choice of your wife—of the mother to future heirs in this family—to mere whim or accident. However indulgent I may have been with you, George, upon this point you will find me inflexible."

"I hope not, sir. In the hurry of choosing, I shall be sure to fix on the wrong lady."

"This is not a moment for jesting," returned the baronet, with knit brows. "You have acquired this pernicious habit of turning everything into a jest from your clerical friend. Let me inform you that *I* am very much in earnest in what I say; and, in proof of this, I wish you to understand that I shall—a—make the provisions of my will dependent on—a—your fulfilling my wishes."

There was a sad want of tact shown in this stroke, Sir Richard. If your game depended upon "play," and was not, indeed, already decided, this may be said to have lost it. George answered without a moment's hesitation, and this time with perfect gravity.

"I should be most happy to comply with any reasonable wish of yours, my dear uncle, and very

sorry that you should think me ungrateful for all your kindness to me; but in a matter that concerns me so nearly as the choice of a wife, I really can't admit of any one's having a right to interfere with my marrying when and whom I please. As to your money, let me assure you that *that* is the very last argument that would influence my conduct. You are perfectly at liberty to leave it all away from me; it will not in the least affect my gratitude for what I owe to you in the past, and I hope," he added, with some emphasis, "that the money may be more justly and worthily bestowed."

Sir Richard's cheek glowed with anger.

"You talk, sir, like all young fools, very grandly about money, which you don't know the value of. Let me tell you that you will find the revenue of this estate by itself quite insufficient to support your position in the county, and enable you to live here as—a—you have been accustomed to do. Nothing is more miserable than the condition of a man struggling to keep up appearances."

"I shouldn't struggle to keep them up at all; I should just adopt a humbler style of living. It

ain't necessary for a fellow to have a train of powdered flunkies and drink champagne every day. Why, if it comes to that, I suppose one could let the place for a couple of thousand a year?"

Let Stourton Towers? Could Sir Richard have heard aright? He pushed his chair back a pace, and glared at his nephew with kindling eyes.

"I will not characterize the taste of such a speech as it deserves. I can only deplore that the family honours must descend to one so lost to all —all sense of dignity, as to suggest the possibility of *letting* the place where his ancestors for so many generations have resided. It betokens—"

"It betokens that I think it's more dignified than running into debt, or than marrying a poor devil of a girl one don't like, for her money."

Sir Richard was very angry; but he determined to try one other tack. He helped himself deliberately to a pinch of snuff from the box presented to him by the Prince Regent, which acted at once as sedative and stimulant: and he said,—

"If all this romantic folly, George, is caused by your flirtation with this little actress, let me tell

you it is deuced ridiculous. I've no objection to your flirting—you may have as many *liaisons* as you like, provided it don't interfere with your settling. No man of the world ever allows those things to interfere with the—a—important events of life."

George was about to reply, in a great heat, but he checked himself. After a pause he said, quietly,—

"The lady you allude to, sir, I respect as much as I admire. I cannot consent to hear her lightly spoken of—and as to the *nature* of my admiration, I need only say I look upon her husband as a *friend*, though our acquaintance is only of ten days' standing. You will remember, no doubt, that I was quite as decided six months ago as I am now, to decline the honour of Miss Lichfield's hand. I told you then I didn't admire her, and I didn't mean to marry her, and I haven't changed my mind."

Sir Richard closed his white lips, and waved his hand in the direction of the door. He felt it was not safe to trust himself longer just now in a discussion with his impetuous nephew.

"That will do. I will not detain you. Any further conversation between us is useless. Perhaps when you are alone you will think better of the intemperate—I may say the insane—language you have been holding. I trust I may find—a—that after calm reflection you—a—rescind the hasty decision you have now arrived at. You may go."

George left the room, without another word.

CHAPTER VI.

A WALK IN STOURTON PARK.

THE parish of Stourton Towers had a church, small, mouldy, and dilapidated, about a mile and a half from the great house, in the opposite direction to Stourbridge. It was a miserable place; for Sir Richard was lay-rector, and he expended no more than he was actually compelled in repairs. His defence was, that the family place of worship was the chapel adjoining the Tower. This, within the last few years, had been gorgeously restored. Painted glass and gold, and colour; blazoned scutcheons, shields, and banners glowed from the walls around. Under the subterfuge of adornment to God's house of prayer, human pride was sufficiently ministered to, in those four walls, it must be confessed. There was very

little to indicate that here, in approaching his Creator's footstool, the creature should lay aside his fleeting pomps and vanities, and humble himself in the dust. The walls sang a triumphant pæan in crests and quarterings, to the manifold glories of the house of Stourton. And the effect of the old chapel, thus decorated, was certainly very picturesque, however little suggestive of devotion.

On Sundays, the service was performed here and at the little parish church, alternately, morning and afternoon. In the afternoon Sir Richard occasionally—very occasionally—went into the red-velvet gallery in the chapel, sacred to himself and guests, and looked down, like Jupiter from Olympus (the suggestion of the heathen deity does not seem so much out of place), upon the farmers, and labourers, and servants below. He stood there in his buff waistcoat, with the ponderous prayer-book, which still invited him in large capitals to pray for the gracious majesty George IV., open on the cushion before him. And this was a ceremony which, "for the sake of example," he went through periodically.

On the morning in question, service was in the chapel, and still going on, when George came out on the terrace in front with his cigar. It was the first time he had been out since his accident: and the need of fresh air was additionally felt just now, after his interview with Sir Richard, following upon a sleepless night. He had exercised a remarkable degree of restraint upon himself during that interview. It was very difficult for him to refrain from saying things which he knew he ought on no account to say; he had retained his light-hearted tone as long as possible, and when driven into speaking gravely and decisively, he had done so—however little Sir Richard might allow it—with moderation. But now he felt the necessity for air, for space and freedom to deliberate in solitude on what line of conduct he should pursue. He sat down on the balustrade which ran at right angles with the chapel, his back against the grey moss-grown wall, just under the pointed arch of a window. They were singing a hymn of which he caught the words of the last verse.

Onward then, to glory move!
More than conqueror thou shalt prove;
Still through danger, toil, and woe,
Christian soldier, onward go!

It has been remarked how, when the mind is apparently engrossed with one subject of overwhelming interest, it is often keenly alive to passing impressions. The commonplace words in question arrested George's attention, and lingered in his ear after the sounds had died away. It was certainly in no spiritual sense that he accepted their meaning; but he repeated them over to himself, while the drone of the rector's voice within the chapel announced that the communion service had commenced. Then came the response to the first commandment, chanted by the little choir. It was very odd, that though the young man who sat outside, leaning his back against the wall, had grave and urgent subject for thought, he could not avoid listening to, and counting each commandment, as the response proclaimed that it had been read. Second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, *seventh*. Then, as the voices rose for that seventh time, in supplication for

strength "to keep this law," the young man knit his brow, and heaved a deep breath. Was the cause a consciousness of delivery from past peril, or the resolution to resist a present one? Or was he, indeed, steeling himself to violate God's law, and man's? and was this the outward and visible sign of the spirit rebelling against that decree?

He had smoked his second cigar against that sunny wall, ruminating with knit brows and eyes that followed the swift cloud-shadows that pursued, and caught each other, and melted away over the soft undulations of the park below, like images in a dream,—before the chapel door swung on its hinges, and the little congregation came streaming out. First, white smock-frocks and leather gaiters, as being always the most eager to escape from confinement, though they seem in no hurry to walk away when once outside the door, but linger round it, waiting for the girls, who are too well conducted to manifest the same indecent impatience, but follow demurely in their smartest ribands. Then the farmers and their wives, burly and radiant; and then the "lower

table," with its powdered heads, and "neat-handed Phillises," and bandy-legged grooms. There is a law about this exit, almost as stringent as that which regulated the procession at a certain royal marriage lately. The "upper table" issues last of all, headed by Mr. Millet and Mrs. Pendarves. Nothing would induce these dignitaries to leave the chapel a moment sooner: and it is generally understood that any member of the "upper table," who should so far forget him or herself as to take an earlier opportunity for exit, would be looked upon as lost to all sense of propriety. The gallery where the family and guests sit communicates with the staircase, so they never use this door; the procession therefore reaches its culminating point in the "upper table," after which the rear is brought up by a few of the halt and blind.

George sees it all pass some thirty yards from him. At another moment he would have greeted Farmer Brown, and evinced interest in the condition of Wilson's live stock, and asked Mrs. Martin after her bantams; but not now. He is

sufficiently far from these good people, as their way out of the park, under the stable arch-way, lies in precisely the opposite direction, for him to be able to avoid speaking, without wounding their feelings. And there he sits, long after the great gong has sounded for luncheon, until the sun, creeping round, already begins to cast the shadow of the house across his face. Just then a sharp brisk step is heard on the gravel, and the next minute Barnet's hand falls on George's shoulder.

"My dear old boy! I'm sorry to hear this news! It has taken us all by surprise at luncheon, and been anything but a grace before meat. It took away all our appetites! I've been hunting for you everywhere. I'm afraid you're down in the mouth about going?"

"No, Jack, I'm not at all sure it ain't much the best thing that could happen to me. I've been bothered about other things this morning, and have had moreover rather *too* lively an interview with my uncle to be quite agreeable. I had rather not exasperate the old gentleman, for, with all his

faults, he has always been kind to me—but I can't help it."

"Passive resistance, or active?" asked Barnet.

"It *has* been passive, hitherto."

"My dear fellow, do nothing rashly. Remember the thrashings I used to give you when you were my fag at Eton, and you used to upset the kettle in your hurry."

"Jack, do you know if the Faulconbridges were at table when my going to India was announced?" said George, rather suddenly.

"No, they hadn't come in yet. I met him on the staircase and told him. It won't interfere with your play, I suppose?"

"No—oh! no—but it may make some difference in—in our arrangements. I may perhaps have to go up to London to-morrow."

"To-morrow! Are you strong enough for that? And how are the rehearsals to get on without you?"

"I'm really perfectly well. I must only be careful, I suppose, not to bruise these confounded ribs of mine. I shall only be away one night,

and we shall have a rehearsal to-morrow before I go. Besides, all the principal scenes I have rehearsed a good deal lately. Say nothing about my running up to town at present, however; it is still uncertain whether I shall have to do so."

"I am heartily sorry for the cause of it all, my dear fellow."

"What cause?" said George sharply, looking up.

"Why, your being ordered abroad in this sudden way, of course. It must be a great bore to *you*, though *I* should like nothing better. I'm a tolerably contented beast, until I hear of a fellow going to Australia, or Africa—or even India, like you. Then I begin to think it is hard that I have to pass my life without the chance of killing a lion, or riding across a prairie. *My* packing wouldn't take long, and there would be no broken hearts at *my* departure," said John, laughing, and then added, "Really, I think the heiress had some difficulty in swallowing the roast mutton I gave her, when she heard the fatal tidings."

"If you helped her as you do yourself, John, I am not surprised."

They had walked round to the other side of the house by the terrace, and now ascended the steps of the hall-door as Lady Trevelyan and one or two others came out.

"Dear George!" said his cousin, holding out both her hands. "This most unexpected news! I am so sorry!"

Even the most truthful people are occasionally untruthful, and I regret to say that Lady Trevelyan, of whom I am fond, proved on this occasion no exception to the rule. She was very, *very* glad at the prospect of George's leaving England. She thought it by far the best thing that could befall him. She was as anxious about him as if he had been her own younger brother. She had seen how bravely he had struggled the night before; but while she applauded the effort, she felt that the only real safety for him was in removal from the danger. The intimacy with the Faulconbridges, begun here, would of course be carried on when he went to London, and this, under the circumstances, was most undesirable. George's career had before this disquieted her.

She looked on idleness as the most injurious of all misfortunes, and had often wished for him a wider sphere of action than the alternations of the Guards' Club House, the "Rag and Famish," and a cavalry mess-room. Military duty at Calcutta might not be much more arduous than at Hounslow or Hampton Court; but he would at all events see a new country, and be surrounded by new faces, images, and manners. All this had passed through her mind since Sir Richard called her into his room, half an hour before, and drily announced George's approaching departure.

"It's quite like a Paladin going off to the Crusades," cried Miss Skipton, sentimentally. "We shall all hang our harps on willow-trees!"

As Miss Skipton was not known to be a proficient on that instrument, society sustained this announcement with fortitude, not anticipating any great loss.

"Shall we announce in the play-bills, 'Last appearance of Mr. Stourton previous to his departure for India'?" suggested Carton; "'where he will star it for a year or two, and probably

return a married man. Those who wish for an opportunity of seeing this distinguished actor before he——'"

"Oh, Mr. Carton," laughed Mrs. Bailey, affectedly, "you are lacerating the feelings of our sex in the most cruel way! Spare us! Here comes Mrs. Faulconbridge ready provided with a veil, you see, to conceal her emotions. I think I ought to fetch one myself!"

Through the amiable lady's persiflage, this shaft of malice did not fall to the ground unperceived by some, at least, among her auditors. Mrs. Faulconbridge, who was crossing the hall as Mrs. Bailey spoke, now joined the group. It was perfectly true that whereas that morning her simple white bonnet had left the fair face under fully exposed to view, she had now drawn a spotted black veil closely over it.

"Let us proceed on our way now," said Lady Trevelyan, quickly, anxious to draw attention from Mrs. Faulconbridge. "George, you must go and be quiet, you look quite pale. Mr. Barnet, will you join our walking-party?"

Faulconbridge himself appeared at that moment, and, after a word or two to George, he ran after, and joined, Lady Trevelyan. Mrs. Bailey, Barnet, and Carton were in front; Mrs. Faulconbridge and her inseparable friend, Miss Skipton, behind.

"How does Sir Richard take his nephew's departure?" asked Faulconbridge.

"He will feel it a good deal."

"And still more, I suppose, his not marrying *to order* before he goes? Strange idea some people have of that same institution of matrimony, Lady Trevelyan."

"It is seldom seriously enough considered."

"My opinion is that so few people are suited to each other in this world, that when the two right ones meet, no considerations of age, or station, or money, or anything else ought to prevent their marrying. Don't you agree with me?"

"Yes, within reasonable limits, I think I do—that is to say, if the characters are exceptional ones, that would *not* be suited every day. With nine-tenths of the world, paltry considerations *are* of importance, I believe, as influencing comfort,

which is the material condition of 'happiness' in their eyes."

"Well, Stourton, perhaps, is not an exceptional character; and yet, you see, it is not every woman who would suit him. Of course all men cannot be as blessed as I am, but, putting the question in an abstract point of view, don't you think that my wife is the sort of woman who would have suited him admirably?"

"Upon my word, Mr. Faulconbridge, I—I really can't say."

"He doesn't want an amiable simpleton, and yet he wouldn't stand a wife who would contradict him. Nina is the most gentle and obedient of creatures, though she has plenty of brains, plenty of enthusiasm. She is really an angel; he would be lucky if he could find some one like her!"

Lady Trevelyan could hardly help laughing, though she was provoked at the extraordinary obtuseness on this subject of a man who was certainly sharp enough on all others. She was, perhaps, too—such is the strange inconsistency of human nature—a little

provoked at his extravagant praise of a wife who was certainly not suited to *him*, and for whom it seemed impossible, after what Lady Trevelyan had seen, that the entire devotion of that powerful nature could be consecrated.

"Ideas of married life differ," she said, at last. "Some of us demand unreasonably much, perhaps; others are content with little. George, at present, does not know what suits him. But it is in vain I assure my uncle that the boy has plenty of time before him."

"May I ask at what age you permit a man to know what suits him?"

"That depends on character. George is now like a spoiled child who cries for the moon—he has never had to exercise much control over his inclinations; so I think it not a bad thing that he should go to India."

"One would think that self-control was an exotic that flourished in that climate, to hear you, Lady Trevelyan."

"It is not much cultivated here, at least. Every passing whim of George's is gratified. It

is well that he should be knocked about a little, and see something more of life than in the fashionable London sense of the word."

"He ought to change places with me; my experience of the word is calculated to teach a vast amount of self-control."

"Do you always exercise it?" asked Lady Trevelyan, looking up into his face.

"About trifles, no. I often say and do what comes uppermost, because I don't think it worth while to do otherwise in indifferent matters; but every hour of my life I am exercising self-control over the wildest, the fiercest . . . the tenderest parts of my nature—nay, Lady Trevelyan, at this very time I am doing so; I burn to pour out to you the history of all I have suffered and am still suffering, but the moment is not come—perhaps it never may come—to tell you all. There is more in my heart 'than is dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

It was profoundly sad, the tone in which he uttered those last words. Lady Trevelyan hardly knew how to reply, she felt so much for this man; she had that conviction which arises from sympathy,

even while his conduct perplexed and annoyed, and his thoughts baffled her scrutiny, that under other circumstances here was a character over which she might have obtained a wholesome influence.

"Do you think you are the only person in the world who have suffered?" she said, at last. "Who has not his own trials? and how can any one judge of those of others? Because you are young, Mr. Faulconbridge, and have the impatient spirit that rebels against every cross laid upon it, every obstacle in its path towards some ideal goal, your own trials seem greater to you than any one else's can be. But whatever they are, this fiery strength of youth that is given you with them, is a great gift, if you do not misuse it. It prompts you to rise and battle with circumstances, where another would sit down quietly under them. When the years shall have tamed this energetic, impetuous spirit, Mr. Faulconbridge, the possession of it will, perhaps, seem to you to have been some counterpoise to the troubles that accompanied it. These things are wonderfully balanced in life. I hardly recognize

myself when I look back to what I was at eighteen. Those years had their own troubles, which I then thought would be lasting—for ever. They have not lasted. Others, perhaps, succeeded them, but they, too, have passed away. And my old self has passed away as completely with them. I seem to be another woman from the one I then remember. You will outlive your present self, Mr. Faulconbridge, and your troubles too, I hope. At all events they cannot be the *same* to you ten years hence."

"There are things which might change me," he replied, "as an unshapely mass of iron, being cast into the furnace, may be moulded into symmetry; but in my battle with Fate, if I do not conquer, I shall remain very much what I am now, to the end of the chapter, I believe—an Ishmael in society. Do you believe, Lady Trevelyan, that what a man strives for ardently enough, and persistently enough, he will obtain at last?"

"Yes—in nine cases out of ten, I do. As I have just said, we change so much,—so few *do*

keep one object in sight through life, that I am certain those who persevere are generally rewarded."

"Thank you for that," he replied, eagerly. "I shall not forget your words."

The first group had stopped to ask which road they were to take. When this point was decided, and they turned to look for Mrs. Faulconbridge and Miss Skipton, those ladies were not in sight.

"I dare say Nina was tired, and turned back," said her husband.

They continued their walk for more than an hour. As they neared home, and crossed one of the avenues, cut fan-wise from the great terrace, Lady Trevelyan's quick eye caught two figures at the farther end, walking slowly, and engaged in close conversation.

"Mrs. Faulconbridge cannot be very tired," she remarked, dryly, "since you see she is walking with George Stourton."

CHAPTER VII.

TREATIES OF FRIENDSHIP.

THAT evening, Lady Trevelyan's surprise was great, when George formally announced to his uncle that he was obliged to go up to London the following afternoon, to be absent one night. His cousin cast about in her mind what his object could be in thus absenting himself from Stourton Towers at this moment. She found it difficult to believe that the reason he alleged was the real one—that of business which he must see after, relative to his embarkation for foreign service. She knew George so well that this sudden alacrity was inexplicable to her, when it was evident that Stourton Towers had a strong attraction for him. But to the immediate result *she*, at least, could not object, however

much Sir Richard might be annoyed. Anything that kept George away for twenty-four hours just now, Lady Trevelyan thought was advantageous.

Sir Richard had been "coming round," as nursemaids call it, since the morning, and was disposed to forgive, and try and conciliate the refractory young dog, when he committed this new offence.

"It is perfectly unnecessary your going to London, I am sure, until the end of the week, when these plays of yours are over, and the people who have been invited here solely on your account are gone. I wonder, sir, who wants your clerical friend when you take yourself off to London? Besides, in your condition, with a couple of broken ribs, it is such d—d folly, to use no stronger term, flying off like a madman, in this way. Upon my life, I believe Pendarves is right. She told me she thought there was something very odd about you."

"Perhaps there is," replied George quite gravely, "but I shall be better after a while.

This journey cannot be put off, and therefore we will say no more about it, uncle Richard."

The party that evening was not a very comfortable one. Every one saw that Sir Richard was annoyed: Lady Trevelyan looked preoccupied, and George was grave and silent. All this acted upon the general circle. Besides, it was Sunday evening, and in the absence of music and cards (Sir Richard was far too particular about "appearances" to have permitted either), nothing but highly-spiced scandal was left by way of innocent recreation. This, Carton administered freely to a select circle; but those who had not a taste for the same passed rather a dreary evening. George scarcely spoke to the Faulconbridges: he spent the whole night on a distant sofa in the library, talking to John Barnet, who, for the first time in his life, looked serious and absent, in the presence of pretty women. Miss Lichfield was serene as ever; but it was not in the nature of things that she should not feel dull, as she had no one to talk to. Lady Katherine and Etheridge sat near her, and *their*

conversation could certainly interest no third person, however attractive the topics might have proved to Miss Lichfield, had she been similarly placed. She caught such fragments as,—

"I prefer silver harness to brass, remember;" and again a minute or two later, "The front drawing-room blue." — "I thought you said yellow?"—"No: the *back* yellow—pray don't make a mistake—and my boudoir, pink."

There were a set of Bible outlines which Mr. Millet always put on the table on Sunday evenings. Miss Lichfield turned these over: not that she was interested in art, or that biblical history had any especial attraction for her: but it was something to do. She had been over that *carte-de-visite* album so often, she had not the face to attack it again.

Lady Trevelyan at last took pity on her.

"Blind old Isaac blessing Jacob," she said, as she came and leant over the young lady's shoulder. "They ought to have made Jacob look very much ashamed of himself,—which he does not. He is a character for whom I have a great contempt,

and yet he is regarded as a hero, while poor Esau——"

"Esau sold his birthright, remember," said Faulconbridge, who had followed her. "All his weak maunderings afterwards can't efface the meanness of that action."

"You talk of *meanness*—what can be so mean as deception—such as Jacob's was? How any blessing could rest on him after that, I do not understand."

"Jacob's deception was mean because it was selfish, and could not be justified by any desire to avenge the right. But, after all, nearly every patriarch, from Abraham upwards, used deception, and in the latter case from the least attractive of all motives—cowardice."

"According to our modern ideas, deception is never attractive," replied Lady Trevelyan.

Miss Lichfield here made a mild observation, which forcibly drew a reply from Faulconbridge: whereupon, Lady Trevelyan, seeing the young lady launched in conversation, walked across the room to where Bradley Ferrers sat alone reading

The Times. They had scarcely exchanged more than a few words during the last two days. Lady Trevelyan felt that she must make a vigorous effort to end this state of things. She could not afford to lose so valuable a friend: least of all now.

"Do you know what this sudden move of George's means, Mr. Ferrers? Are you in his confidence?"

He looked up, but did not put down the paper.

"No, I am not in his confidence. He is not likely to tell me."

"If he has got into any difficulty, which I cannot help fearing, it is very natural he should apply to you as an old friend—more so than to Mr. Faulconbridge, as I fancy he has done—or that wild young curate, which he appears to be now doing."

"Faulconbridge has the gift of winning confidence and sympathy," said the lawyer, with a touch of bitterness. "It is not every one who is so fortunate.'

"Yet he loses it sometimes also, Mr. Ferrers, I think. You seem to me to avoid him now whenever you can. Yet you spoke to me of him in high terms. Have you had reason to change your opinion?"

Bradley coloured. He put *The Times* down on the table, thereby gaining a few seconds to frame his reply.

"You will forgive me, Lady Trevelyan, for declining to discuss Faulconbridge, or to assign any reason for the change, if there be such, in my manner towards him. I was instrumental in bringing him and his wife here, and I feel a heavy responsibility in the matter, which increases hourly. At present his conduct is inexplicable to me."

"I believe he is very, *very* much to be pitied," said Lady Trevelyan, with emphasis. "His love for his wife evidently blinds him to the fact that, under that look of extreme simplicity, she is a flirt. I am afraid now it cannot be denied. And yet Mr. Faulconbridge, in his chivalrous confidence, singles out George, of all men in the world, to be

his bosom friend here. It distresses me more than I can say."

"Are you sure," replied Ferrers, speaking very slowly, as he looked straight into her face, "that Faulconbridge is quite as blind as he appears?"

"Yes, I do,—I *must* think so. I am sorry for saying what I did,—for doubting him, when I spoke to you the other day. I feel confident now that he is deceived."

"Perhaps so."

"I had some conversation with him this morning. He is very odd. I don't pretend to understand him—and it seems strange that I should attempt his defence against *you*, Mr. Ferrers—his friend, who spoke so warmly of him a few days ago! It is easy to see that this young man has many faults—that his principles have been formed from peculiar circumstances, rather than from unswerving laws—and that therefore he is very likely to do things which we shall deplore; but his admiration for all that is pure and good prevents my believing him capable of any base and ignoble action, which no distorted principle *could* justify."

"I expected he would find a warm defender in Lady Trevelyan. Allow me to observe, however, that, in my career at the bar, I have found very few actions a man would not, with sophistry, defend, blinding himself, perhaps, more than he does others—other *men*, at least."

As she listened to his somewhat bitter words, and looked into the worn, sallow face of the man who uttered them, a perception of the truth, for the first time, flashed upon her. Lady Trevelyan carefully avoided Faulconbridge during the remainder of that evening. And Bradley Ferrers wrote the following words in his journal some hours afterwards :—

"*Sunday, midnight.*—I have this evening become quite certain of what I have suspected for the last two or three days—that that fool, Faulconbridge, is falling madly in love with Lady T——. To watch him when he is talking to her, but still more to see his eyes following her about the room, *listening* with them jealously, so to speak, when she addresses another man—to note the difference in his manner towards her, and towards all other

women, his wife included—is quite enough for a man whose perceptions are sharpened, as mine are in this case, by acute pain and disappointment.

"He has managed, with that silver tongue of his, to excite my lady's poetical imagination, and to interest her heart by telling her something of his past life. She listens to him in a way she never did to me: she accorded me her *respect*, her *esteem;* she consulted me; she treated my opinion —once upon a time, at all events—with consideration. She does nothing of all this with F. 'Respect' and 'esteem' are certainly not the terms that designate her feelings towards *him*. She listens, indeed, as I perceive too well, with deep interest, and then she lectures him, as women love to do; and she can find ready excuses for him, too, which is better than being respected for principles, or sound judgment, or what not.

"Am I unjust towards this man? I cannot but remember that ten days ago I felt very differently towards him, as my lady to-night pointed out to me. Did I not myself plead with her for him, begging her to befriend my friend? Did I not

counsel him above all things to cultivate *her* society? And am I such a mean, miserable wretch as to resent that this has come to pass? that this brilliant young fellow, with his beauty and talent, naturally creates a stronger interest than I can—a plain, ungifted man, with nothing but his devotion to recommend him? He can never be anything to her: her noble nature would recoil at the very first suspicion that she was absorbing gradually the love that belongs rightfully to another woman. Yet this is what is taking place. I ask myself again, am I unjust about Faulconbridge, or is he deliberately sacrificing his wife to this suddenly-conceived passion? I am jealous—I know it too well—but does this jealousy completely blind me? I write these words, perhaps, to my future shame and contrition; at all events, to my present and lasting grief."

Wilmot arrived in time for the rehearsal, having travelled all night. By dint of strenuous efforts, the dramatic body were got together, and securely housed within what Mr. Wraggles called "the temple of Thespis," before half-past eleven. Soon

after that hour, the rehearsal began, and very successful, considering all things, it was. Except Etheridge's, the parts were now tolerably perfect. Miss Skipton, it is true, always gave the wrong cues, but then she corrected herself, which might be looked upon as part of the "comic business" belonging to Madame Deschappelles, and would not militate against the success of the play. For instance, she observed in the very first scene, to her daughter, that "your father should engage an additional clerk for the conquest of your account books," which sounded as if Pauline's arithmetic had been sadly neglected; but she promptly added, "Oh! I don't mean that, 'for the account-book of your conquests,' that's it;" which amendment was carried, with much laughter.

George and his *prima donna* went through their scenes "as if," said Mr. Wraggles, "they'd bin doin' nothin' else all their lives," which, assuming that expression, by a bold figure of speech, to mean the past week, was pretty literally true. There was only to be one more rehearsal of the *Lady of Lyons*, the grand full-dress one, the following

night, for which George would return in ample time. He looked anxious and excited, not pale as he had done the previous day; and when he shook hands with his friends and jumped into the brougham which took him to the station, it was with the fixed expression of a man bent on some important enterprise, not the air of joyous indifference to all beyond the passing hour, which was habitual to him.

Though I have said a good deal *about* Mrs. Faulconbridge in these pages, I have had but few opportunities hitherto of allowing her to speak for herself, and of enabling the reader to judge of her at first instead of at second hand. I feel that this is hardly fair conduct towards the lady who is, ostensibly, my heroine. And, as the opportunities of doing this, I foresee, will become fewer, as the events of my story are now crowding thickly on, we will take advantage of a minute or two's breathing space to listen to her and Miss Skipton as they walk home together. The others have all gone forward. The fair young woman, with her enthusiastic admirer and friend, are alone.

"Dearest Mrs. Faulconbridge, not another word! You must wear my pearls in your hair: they'll look sweet!"

"How kind you are! much more so than I deserve, dear Miss Skipton; but for you, I should feel very desolate here, without one woman friend."

"My dear, the women are all envious of you, that's it. As to that Mrs. Bailey——"

"Ah! but even Lady Trevelyan, who, Edgar says, is such a perfect woman, I can't, somehow, feel at ease with her as I do with you."

"Dearest Mrs. Faulconbridge!"

"Call me Nina, will you?"

"By all means, dear, if you let me."

"And will you continue to befriend me, as you have done hitherto, under all circumstances? Might I call for your help and countenance under any difficulty?"

"Always, dear, always!"

"If I should do anything you—you thought very wrong, would you—still——"

"Bless me! My dear Nina, I am constantly

doing what is very wrong myself: why should I throw stones? It was only last Tuesday I told a horrid fib, when I said——"

"Oh! but I mean something much more serious than that. Would you stand by me, if you thought that all the world would disapprove of what you did?"

"My dear," exclaimed the spinster, agitating her glass vehemently, as was her wont when excited, "I can't think what can be the object of asking me all these questions. I don't know what you mean; but I do know—that is, I *don't* know what—what is the use of a friend, if it—it isn't to stand by one when all the rest of the world stands aloof!"

Whereupon the younger lady expressed her sentiments with un-English effusion, by flinging her arms round Miss Skipton's neck, and bursting into tears.

"You dear, kind woman! I may put your friendship to the test sooner than you expect. Ask me no questions," she continued, rapidly, putting her hand upon the mouth of her friend.

"I will tell you all as soon as—as I may. You have made me so happy by letting me feel that I have some one I can depend upon, as on an elder sister. It is so forlorn to have only men to talk openly with. There are things they never understand!"

"Ah, well, it may be so, my dear," gasped out Miss Skipton, somewhat taken aback. "I have no men-friends, or next to none, and I should think it was horribly difficult to express oneself to them. But there's your husband—surely *he*——"

"Oh, Edgar is very kind," said his wife, colouring; "but—but it is not the same thing. He is very much occupied. Poor Edgar! He is very, *very* kind, but—he seldom talks openly to me, how could I do so to him?"

"How indeed!" said Miss Skipton, shaking her head. "Ah! in this respect, I fear, all men are pretty much alike, my dear."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MESSAGE FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE.

THE Baileys were at last gone that morning. Carton had also taken his departure. He assured every one that nothing but a pressing letter from Lord Handerston would have called him away just now: and I am afraid the party unanimously passed a vote of thanks to his lordship for the service.

But these defalcations were to be more than counterbalanced by a great influx of visitors during the next three days. Every room in Stourton Towers was to be full, and Mrs. Pendarves, in seeing after the necessary arrangements, had enough work on her hands. "Looking after the wenches" was no joke with that conscientious, thorough-paced woman, whose

tongue was fully as efficient an engine for promoting cleanliness as a patient *ramoneur*. She was now standing, at four o'clock in the afternoon, massive and inexorable as a Greek Fate, in the centre of the bed-room lately tenanted by the Baileys; her lynx eyes fixed on a small island of dust, which had nestled itself away from the ocean of well-swept carpet underneath the drawers. Two lean, depressed-looking maids in lilac cottons, with a general flueyness about their hair and caps, had just left the room laden with all their implements of war, pails and brooms, &c.; but the upper housemaid—the responsible captain of this force—stood nervously flapping a duster, in an irrelevant manner, about the room, cowed by the presence of her general.

"Do you call this '*Done*,' Mary Anne?" sounded the awful voice of Mrs. Pendarves, at length, pointing with her forefinger to that fugitive colony under the drawers. "If so, our ideas of '*done*' is different. None of your whited sepulchres for me. I can't abide a woman with a smart gown and a dirty under pettic't, no

more I can't abide dirt out o' sight—even on the floor. Pah! How the room do smell o' scents that Mrs. Bailey always bin a using! Open the winder, do. *How* often have I told you, Mary Anne, always to leave the winders open when folks is gone? No one can't tell what they leaves behind them, and it's unpleasant for them as comes after. There's a spot of grease on the carpet. Why haven't you fetched it up with your iron?"

"I—I didn't see it, mum."

"Didn't see it? What are you there for, then? Not to look at, I suppose. You're none so pretty. Come! Sarah! Jane! one of you, bring an iron here, and look sharp about it." She proceeded on her tour of inspection, into the next room. "No. 10—yaller—bachelor's—Mr. Carton's: he *is* a bachelor, and no mistake, and a yaller one too. Humph! What a deal of ink he do always spill about his table, to be sure! And as to *paper*, the reams as I've put in here—it's lucky there's 'Stourton Towers' on it all, for I've known folks afore now make a clean sweep when they

went away: but havin' got our house printed big in red letters now, I find saves a deal. They must use it *in* the house, leastways."

Though Mary Anne was in the room, these remarks partook of the nature of a soliloquy, inasmuch as they were addressed to no one in particular. Now, however, she turned sharply round.

"Why ain't there a bath in this room?"

"We was goin' to bring it back, mum. The gentleman didn't use it, and we was rather short, 'cause three was broke, if you remember, mum."

"I remember that they came a week ago, Mary Anne! Don't you try and gammon *me*. I wonder you ain't tired o' that game. So the gentleman didn't use a bath? Well, I haven't much opinion of folks as is not free with soap and water—and that's one good thing I will say about those actor-people, that——"

Something very like a laugh made her turn round. The door was open, and Edgar Faulconbridge stood there. A few minutes before he had passed this corridor on his way to the North

Tower. He had caught a glimpse of Mrs. Pendarves, and had heard her energetic tongue, and had paused for an instant, as if hesitating in some suddenly conceived project. Then, opening the door of communication to his tower, he sprang up the old oak stairs. On reaching his room he unlocked a case, from which he took a roll of papers. One sheet of these he selected, and put into his pocket; the rest he replaced. He then ran down the stairs, as lightly as he had mounted, and the next minute he was standing at the open door, hearing himself favourably alluded to, in connection with soap and water.

"Mrs. Pendarves, may I have a few minutes' conversation with you?"

Mrs. Pendarves was seldom taken aback, but she gave the young man a puzzled stare, which said, (such is the advantage of an expressive countenance,) "What on earth do you want with me?"

Her tongue, however, after a few seconds found a more conventional form of conveying the same thought.

"I'm very busy, sir, but if you can tell me what you want here, I'm at your service. . . . Mary Anne, you go and open the shutters in the layloc room, that haven't bin used this winter, and see that the fire's lit, and in the dressin' room likewise. That," she added, referring to the list in her hand, —"that's for Mr. and Mrs. Rochford. Then there's the Indgey room, you know, at the end, and the goold single-bedded, next it—that's for Lord Carrlyon and his mother, the dowager. They'll want a good scrummaging, they will. The rooms I mean, of course, Mary Anne. The goold single-bedded is good enough for the old lady now, I'm thinking. Last time she was here, afore she was a widder, we had to give her the best tapestried; but dowagers has got to put up with second-best, in coorse. Come, Mary Anne, you be off, and look sharp! I shall be after you afore you have a-reached the west wing. Now, sir, I'm at your service."

He closed the door: then politely brought forward a chair for the housekeeper, and one for himself.

("That's the way they do it on the stage," thought the astute old woman, as she sat down.)

"It's not about smokin' in your bedroom, sir, is it?" she said, before he could speak; "because I've had a deal of young gentlemen trying *that* on, and we always sets our faces against it: so it ain't no use, sir, your——"

"It is not that, Mrs. Pendarves; I am come to give you a message from a person you knew many, many years ago. I only learnt a day or two since from Lady Trevelyan by accident, that your maiden name was Clutton—Martha Clutton, was it not?"

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Pendarves, staring at him as if her eyes would drop out.

"And you lived with Lady Margaret as second lady's-maid when you were a girl, I think? In fact, you have never left the family since you entered it at sixteen?"

"And that's fifty-one year ago. I married Pendarves, as was house-steward, eight year afterwards,—soon after my lady died. I promised her as I'd never leave her son—that's the late baronet

as was—but do my dooty by the house, and see as the servants did theirs, so long as it pleased God to give me health. And that's what I *have* a-done, though Sir Henry and Pendarves was took in one year. Ah! there's a many ups and downs!"

"Well, Mrs. Pendarves, the person who sends you this message, knew you as Martha Clutton. Five-and-forty years ago, it seems, she had a great affection for you. This message comes from beyond the grave—for she is dead—but she had a conviction, as you will see by what she wrote on this paper, that you would not forget her. The name of Teresa Conti——"

Mrs. Pendarves started violently. Then, knitting the brows above her quick black eyes, she glanced towards the door.

"Hush, sir! speak lower if you've got anything to say. Them girls are always prying about. Yes, I remember her, poor dear young lady, well enough. It's not likely as I *should* forget, after——" she looked sharply into his face, as though she would read there how much

or how little the young man knew about the person they were speaking of.

He placed the paper in her hand without a word. It was evidently a portion of the last wishes and instructions of the deceased woman in question, and ran thus:—

"If Martha Clutton is still alive, and that you can learn where she is living, you must go and see her. I was always fond of her, and after Lady Margaret's death, in my great strait and peril, she remained a true and faithful friend. She was the only one present on *that* occasion, which it is needless to speak of again. If the firm support of that woman could have saved me from a horrible pitfall, my life would not have been blasted as it has. I never saw her after that day, and she probably never *heard of me but once after it.* But I do not fear that she will have forgotten me. If she is alive, you must seek her out. Tell her who you are, and give her my blessing. Like the rest of the world, she believed me to be dead many years ago; and I had my own reasons, as you know, for not

disturbing that belief. But now, in memory of the old days, and of her fidelity to the poor Italian girl, I beg Martha Clutton to befriend you, my boy; and I do not fear that she will refuse to do so, if you can show her the means of serving you."

Here the writing reached the bottom of the page; there was no more. Mrs. Pendarves twitched off her spectacles, and sat there with a face discomposed out of all its ordinary routine of expressions.

"Who—what are you to Teresa Conti?" she asked at length, in a hoarse, tremulous voice.

"I am her grandson."

The old woman threw herself back in her chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"Good Lord! good Lord! Who'd ha' thought it? And what ever brought you *here*, sir?"

"Well, a variety of motives, Mrs. Pendarves; among others, a little curiosity, as you may imagine. Now that I come to know Sir Richard, any hope of finding him an altered and repentant man has entirely vanished. A hardened, heartless,

selfish old age is the fit end to such a life. But it would not be complete if it were not a disappointed and embittered old age also. It may yet turn out to be this, Mrs. Pendarves, though he has all that the lust of the eyes and the pride of life can desire."

He spoke rather under his breath, but with a concentration of hatred in the tone, and in the keen-burning eyes and white lips of his handsome face, that made the housekeeper, brave old woman as she was, wince.

"Yours is a hard case, sir; I'm not a-going to deny it; but don't you forget, young man, for all that, who he is."

"Make yourself perfectly easy," he replied, smiling contemptuously, as he read her thought. "I am not going to do my respected grandfather any personal injury; even the idea of publicly exposing him—of bringing him to the bar of public opinion, and forcing him to make the only poor reparation in his power, has been abandoned by me since I came here, for a more lenient measure of justice. I shall only take care that he learns

before he dies who I am, and *what* I am. Mrs. Pendarves, how have you, an honest, upright woman, managed to live all these years in this house, with that man as master, knowing what you know?"

"It was because I *did* know, and had a hold on him," said the housekeeper, sitting erect once more, her eye kindling as she spoke. "I'd a-promised my lady to stick by the family, come what might; for she knew as how her sons were bad uns. And a deal o' work went on in Sir Henry's time which I didn't like; but that was nothin' to this of Sir Richard's—mister he was then. After I come to know the truth I was furious, like; and then he told me as how *she* was dead, and Sir Henry said the same; that was two year after. But I never could abide the sight of Mr. Richard for long and long after that. He didn't come into the title and property for a matter of twenty year or so. He were forty-seven year old, and a colonel then. And so he come to me, and he says: 'Pendarves,' says he; 'you was my mother's body servant for six or eight year, and

you've a-bin housekeeper here eighteen year since that, and I hope you're not a-goin' now, because of that foolish trick of mine, as I done when I was but a boy.' 'Sir Richard,' says I, 'if I stays, it's out of consideration for my word to your blessed mother, my lady, as is dead and gone. And as to callin' it a *trick*,' says I, 'I wonder you should use such a word for a deed like *that*. However, I'm willin' to let by-gones be by-gones; you're a gettin' old, and have sown all your wild oats, I hope. So if you keep your house decent and respectable, I'll stay here,' and I did. But it's all along of that hold on him," added Mrs. Pendarves, "that I have been able to remain here—I know *that* well enough. This is the fust time as I've ever said so much; but as you knows everythink, I don't mind speaking open."

Mrs. Pendarves was, indeed, greatly excited, and carried quite beyond herself. The past was a sealed volume which she never permitted herself to open. Not being imaginative, nor even sentimental like her niece, it is probable that she rarely suffered her thoughts to wander back to scenes and

events which had now been suddenly thrust before her eyes once more. She was sensible and cautious; but she had strong feelings, which her sixty-seven years had not yet quelled, and since they had been touched by a reference to that terrible drama of her youth, she spoke more freely, perhaps, than prudence might have dictated.

"Mrs. Pendarves, my grandmother was not deceived in believing that you were sincerely attached to her, and would not forget her even at the end of forty-five years."

"Ah! she were a sweet young lady, and we was all fond of her, from my lady downwards. It would ha' broke my lady's heart if it had happened while she was alive. Yes! I was that fond of her, I'd ha' gone through fire and water to ha' served her; and what she *did* ask of me was a small thing, indeed. And so she's not bin dead all these years? Well, well, now, to think of that! It was all a make-up, then?"

"It was so far true, that my grandmother wrote to say that she was dead thenceforward to Sir Richard, and to every other member of the family.

Of course she rejected their money with scorn. Her only thought was to bring up her son free from the contamination of such a father. She wrote therefore to say, that as long as she lived they would never hear of her again. She changed her name, and kept her word."

"Your father, then, was her only child, sir? Well," she added, looking at him with a contemplative air, "you favour your grandmother more nor Sir Richard, though there ain't much likeness to speak of, neither ways. She was a sweet purty woman, with the beautifulest voice I ever heerd."

"She was lovely, to my mind, when she died; she was one of those women who never grow old. Oh, Mrs. Pendarves, you who knew her can understand what the loss of such a woman was to me! She was father, mother, everything to me when mine were taken."

"She'd gone through a deal," said Mrs. Pendarves, wiping the corner of her eyes, "and bein' in the coorse of nature, sir, she couldn't ha' troubled much to go. She were a proud nature,

and must have had a hard time of it, poor dear lady!"

"Mrs. Pendarves, I am not going to keep you now any longer. You know my secret. I shall only be here three days more. It is possible, however, that before then I may call on you to render me a service. For Teresa Conti's sake, Mrs. Pendarves, I think you will not refuse me?"

"What is it?" asked the old woman, all her old caution at once aroused. "I can't, for the sake of any one, promise to do I don't know what. But this much I'll say, that if I *can* serve you with a clear conscience, sir, I will."

"And my secret is safe in your hands? You, of course, understand how essential it is that no one should guess who I am as long as I remain here."

"I'm not given to blabbin', sir. I may be sorry you should come here—indeed, I can't see what ever good it can do; but since you're here, it's no business of mine. I'm not the one as 'll interfere, unless I see somethin' wrong. But you be careful, young sir. I'm sorry for you, very sorry. It's a hard case — but you must just bear it. Your

grandmother showed you an example there. It's no use a-stormin' and a-ravin'. God puts us one side o' the blanket or the other, and we must lie there. All the cussin' in the world won't get you back on the right side, if you're on the wrong. That's *my* views. You leave the old gentleman to his own conscience. Him and me are no partic'lar friends, though we have lived such a many years in the same house together. But I say, leave him to his own conscience. What with lies, and one thing and another, he'll have an uneasy time enough, when his time *do* come. Don't *you* interfere."

Perhaps the advice was sound under the circumstances. At all events there was enough in the young man's demeanour to warrant the old woman's shrewd suspicions. She rose, and he opened the door, holding out his hand. At the same moment, Jemima, with a very dishevelled crop, came running down the passage.

"Oh! lor, aunt, I've been looking for you everywhere. I'm sure I didn't know you were—with—Mr. ——"

Now, I am sorry to say this was not strictly true; for Jemima had obtained accurate information from Mary Anne, and had been stationed at the end of the passage for the last ten minutes, wondering what on earth the handsome actor could be saying to her aunt. But Mrs. Pendarves was in no humour to indulge Jemima's inquisitiveness. With a stern demand for the keys, which as usual that young person had mislaid, the housekeeper stumped down the passage, while Faulconbridge turned in the opposite direction to regain his tower.

CHAPTER IX.

FOREBODINGS.

As a counterpoise to George's absence, Edgar Faulconbridge was in better spirits, less gloomy and pre-occupied, that evening than he had been for some days. Perhaps, a very keen observer might detect a certain feverish excitement in his manner; and there was one, at least, who watched him closely. We are apt to attribute every such phase in a character to the particular influence we know of; and it is possible that Bradley Ferrers may have been deceived, like the rest of us, in supposing that one motive power alone was sufficient to govern every thought and action of his former friend. He watched him closely; and he watched Lady Trevelyan too. She looked worried. She certainly shunned Faulconbridge

now, though his adroitness was such, that he contrived, in the most natural manner possible, to appropriate the seat beside her more than once, as she moved her position that evening. His wife, too, so Ferrers fancied, avoided Faulconbridge's eye. She looked pale, frightened, and had certainly been crying. She clung close to Miss Skipton, and when Lady Trevelyan sat down on the sofa by her, the young woman's nervous distress could hardly escape notice. It was in vain that Lady Trevelyan tried to draw her into a sustained conversation; that with her large grey eyes bent compassionately upon poor Nina, she sought, with her sweet even-toned voice, to attract her confidence, and tranquillize her fears. Beyond a few disjointed sentences, a vacant smile, and a tremulous laugh, Lady Trevelyan could get nothing out of Mrs. Faulconbridge.

An unpleasant thought crossed the fair and gentle widow's mind, as she gave up the attempt.

"Can it be that *she* is jealous, too?—jealous of her husband's seeking my society? Poor Bradley Ferrers opened my eyes to the possi-

bility of misconstruction on this score. So I must give up the poor boy, I suppose, to his own impetuosity, and to this foolish little wife, who certainly *can* have no influence over him! I fear—I very much fear—that she is laying up great misery for herself and him. Her condition to-night, now that George is gone, is lamentable—no one can be blind to it. Can anything show it more than the change in her manner towards me? She was always shy, *but* not more so than was natural, when she came here. We were very tolerable friends at first, but in proportion as her intimacy with George has increased, she has grown more and more reserved with me. The more I have tried to draw her towards me, the more she has shrunk back. This idea of jealousy is too laughable—it cannot be. Besides, her manner is almost equally embarrassed with every one. I am thankful they have only two more days to be here! The interest I feel in *him* is very deep; but as it would be impossible now for our intercourse to be more than general, I have little to regret

on that score, and I am sure their longer stay here would be fraught with danger."

Somewhat in this wise ran the lady's reflections during the course of that Monday night. The party was large: there were several new guests to be attended to; but Lady Trevelyan had managed, before the hour of retiring, to spend these ten minutes beside the young actress, and thus to confirm all her painful suspicions regarding her.

Her attention had also been attracted to another person that evening with surprise. John Barnet, in the midst of this gay party, was not like himself; dull and abstracted, with a forced pleasantry now and then, costing an effort which was but too apparent. And just as Ferrers strengthened his foregone conclusions touching Faulconbridge from the high spirits of the latter this evening, so Lady Trevelyan fed her fears touching George from the aspect of his friend. "He has a very keen suspicion of the truth, even if George has not made him actually his confidant," she said to herself; "and being really high-principled,

however wild and noisy he generally appears, I can see that this Mr. Barnet is distressed, and in doubt what to do."

It is probable that the new guests observed nothing of all this. That handsome Mrs. Rochford, with her Parisian air, bearing her thirty-six summers so lightly; Lord Carrlyon, grown somewhat bald and graver, but still the most popular man wherever he goes; his horrid old mother, and half a dozen more, were entirely unconscious of the hopes and dreads and anxieties that were tugging at so many hearts that evening. Except to those few, indeed, whose sight was sharpened to behold what lay beneath the surface, everything was smooth and gay. If there were moments when Lady Trevelyan's eyes were troubled, her general bearing at least was calm and gracious as ever. When she talked to Mrs. Rochford about her baby, how was that delighted mother to know that the beautiful Diana's thoughts were far away? When Lord Carrlyon spoke with such *bonhomie* to "that good-looking fellow who is down here, directing

the plays—husband to the pretty woman with gold hair on the sofa," how could he possibly tell that the young man's heart was agitated by schemes and passions very far removed from the stage small talk he listened to?

With little variation all this was repeated next day. It was a very long one to Lady Trevelyan. In nothing is the heroism of women shown more than under the irritating exigencies of society, when the powers of endurance are severely taxed. A man quietly sneaks away, lights his cigar, and communes with his own heart in a refreshing walk of a dozen miles, say, in the rain. A woman sits in the drawing-room, talking *chiffons* with her guests, while she is sick with anxiety, and longing hopelessly for the solitude of her own room. But if she is anything like a woman, she will never give in.

The actors wandered up and down the house like troubled spirits, with knit brows and crumpled play-books, muttering detached sentences; and fastening upon passers-by, after the fashion of the Ancient Mariner, to pour their oft-told tale

into unwilling ears. Faulconbridge mooned about restlessly: his wife retired to her own room after breakfast, and was not seen till luncheon. Sir Richard took some of the men over his farm; and when the gong brought all the party together once more in the great dining-room, he told his niece that he meant to drive over himself to the station to meet George.

"It will give us the opportunity of a little conversation, and so forth," he added, significantly. Lady Trevelyan knew what that meant, and she trembled. In the present state of things, what might not the smallest exasperation drive George to commit? But she was aware that all argument with Sir Richard would be in vain.

The train was due at 5.30. It was a wet afternoon, and long before that hour, Faulconbridge's slight, firmly-knit figure, buttoned up to the chin, was to be seen striding along under the driving rain in the direction of Stourbridge. The station there is an open one. A narrow platform, with a shed only partially covering it, divides the high-road from the line of rails: so

that from a carriage, every one on the platform is visible, and *vice versâ*. Upon this platform Faulconbridge stood, a few minutes before the arrival of the London train. He muttered something very like an oath, when the Stourton carriage with its blue and silver liveries drove up soon afterwards, disclosing at the windows Sir Richard's portly figure, and bloated face supported by its satin stock, and surmounted by the glossy wig and hat curled up at the ears; the frame just taking in one gouty hand that rested heavily on the gold-headed cane. Sir Richard saw the young man—he could not help it: and he saw him turn impatiently away. The railing that separated them was slight; the distance, not half a dozen yards. The baronet sat there, expecting that his guest would acknowledge his presence in some way; but his guest walked to the further extremity of the platform instead.

"Vastly ill-bred," said Sir Richard to himself. "There is something about that man altogether which is repulsive to me. Deuced insolent his standing there, without even taking off his hat.

There is a defiance about his manner which is quite intolerable, considering his position. I suppose George tolerates him for the sake of the woman. I shall take care, however, never to let any of these d—d low sort of people inside the doors again. I've had enough of plays, and actors, and all the rest of it."

The baronet leant out of the carriage window as the train slid up to the station, and George jumped out. He saw the two young men shake hands—a hurried word or two passed between them—and then George, with a crowd of obsequious porters round him, came towards the carriage.

"Jump in, George. How are you? I am afraid none the better for these two journeys, and tiring yourself about London."

"I'm none the worse, uncle Richard. Here's Faulconbridge, sir. You'll give him a lift back? It's raining hard."

"I drove here expressly to bring you back *alone*, George. Step in."

George was now more anxious than ever for

Faulconbridge's society to stave off another "interview" with Sir Richard.

"But, sir, you can't let a fellow walk back to your own house in such rain as this?"

"When that fellow, sir, has the d—d impertinence to stand here for five minutes, turning his back on one, I need not be very particular. Get in. James, put up the steps."

And away they rolled, through the thick blinding rain, uncle and nephew, neither of them favourably prepared, by that little overture, to discuss affairs in the most conciliatory spirit. What passed between them I need not here detail. That it was in some sort a repetition, probably aggravated, of their interview on Sunday, might be gathered from the fact that George's face was flushed and Sir Richard's absolutely purple with excitement, when Lady Trevelyan came out upon the doorsteps, in her anxiety to receive them. Half-an-hour later, walked in Faulconbridge, splashed and dripping, and went up straight to his tower. All the actors were to dine together earlier that night. Those among the guests who

wished to attend the rehearsal were to be allowed to do so; otherwise the audience was to consist of the servants, labourers and dependants on the estate. Such was the programme laid down.

Lady Trevelyan had tried in vain to get a few minutes' conversation with her cousin. Whether it was that he avoided her, she could hardly tell. He seemed to have so much to do in preparation for the evening, so many orders to give, while all the other actors came pouring in to ask such a variety of questions, that Lady Trevelyan soon saw it was hopeless to expect to get George alone. He left the library at last, saying that he must go and dress; yet, half-an-hour later, his cousin, passing by the billiard-room, which was now quite dark, heard voices in earnest conversation, one of which she recognized as George's, while the other appeared to her to be Barnet's.

"He is in respectable hands, at all events," she said to herself. "Thank God! he has told that man all. He will, no doubt, do more than *I* could have done to save him. Poor George!" and thus she tried to solace herself.

She was terribly anxious, however—anxious and excited. She would have given anything to go to this rehearsal, but it had been put to the vote, and being such a bad night, all the other ladies had decided against going. Lord Carrlyon, and Barnet, and one or two other men, would go, and bring back their report, but the ladies would "keep themselves fresh for to-morrow." It was impossible Lady Trevelyan should leave her guests; but she had worked herself up into that state of nervous irritability which made it a hard matter even for *her* to submit to conventionalities, while the last acts in this drama of real life were being enacted, for all she knew, so near at hand. She chafed at the restraint. She would have watched them closely this evening, those two concerning whom she had so painful and hourly-strengthened a presentiment. George had returned, desperate and determined; she read it in his eye. It was in vain she repeated to herself the comfortable suggestion that John Barnet might keep him from falling. She never believed in her secret heart, that the good-humoured, racketing young curate

was capable of obtaining an ascendancy over her cousin. She was very miserable as she sat before her mirror dressing for dinner, utterly listless to Mrs. Lacy's exertions, but sensibly alive to the opening and shutting of every door down the long corridor, the heavy tramp of the footman bearing hot water to the different rooms, and all the distant strange echoes that tingle through a large house, filled with busy life, when doors and windows are closed for the night, and sound has no chance of escape.

The gong sounded for the dinner of the *corps dramatique*. Lady Trevelyan became nervously impatient to get downstairs. When, at last, the business of dressing was over and she entered the library, the merry sound of laughter from the adjoining room told her that the dinner had already begun. She sat there by herself for some time, shivering. She had no sort of excuse for going in there, which was what she would have liked to do. She took up a book, but it was quite in vain she attempted to read. At last she rang the bell. Millet entered.

"Have the ladies and gentlemen everything they want in the next room, Millet?"

"Yes, my lady, but there *is* only gentlemen."

"Where are Mrs. Faulconbridge and Miss Skipton?"

"The ladies, I believe, preferred dining in their own apartments, my lady. They were attiring when the gong sounded."

Mr. Millet withdrew, and Lady Trevelyan, after a minute's consideration, went upstairs once more, and down the long corridor, past her own room, then turning to the left, she entered the North Tower. She stopped at Mrs. Faulconbridge's door and knocked. There was a rustling inside, and Nina's sweet voice said rather tremulously,—

"We have everything we want, thank you."

"Everything, thank you," echoed Miss Skipton's shrill treble.

Lady Trevelyan retraced her steps, without even announcing her presence. She found about the same amount of comfort in the fact of Mrs. Faulconbridge's making a friend of that not very strong-minded, but upright female, Jane

Skipton, that she derived from George's intimacy with Barnet. It was certainly better than nothing. It was even within the bounds of possibility that the garrulous, well-meaning spinster might exercise some wholesome influence over this unhappy, misguided young woman. But as a staff to trust to, this was not to be leant on too heavily.

For half an hour or more she sat in the drawing-room alone. Then she heard them rise from table in the next room. She recognized Faulconbridge's voice. She heard him cross the hall, and go upstairs. Poor young fellow! How she pitied him from the bottom of her heart! That proud high-spirited nature, which had already had so much to try it, to be wounded and deceived thus in its best affections, where he reposed such unlimited confidence,—how would it not embitter all his after-life! How would it not poison and corrode all that was best and purest within him!

She heard the carriages driving over the wet gravel, round to the hall-door. She could restrain herself no longer; but ran out into the hall. There was Wilmot, buckling on his sword, and

Bradley Ferrers looking quite out of his element in a grey comic wig, and a suit of stage old-gentleman's clothes. And there was a group of servants in silent admiration round. The other actors had not yet made their appearance.

Impelled, in her excitement, by an impulse she could not resist, Lady Trevelyan put her hand on Ferrers' arm and drew him aside.

"Mr. Ferrers, I am terribly anxious on the subject we have spoken of more than once. I fear—I dare not say *what*—but, perhaps—perhaps something may yet be done to prevent all this misery. George may yet be brought to reason. Watch him to-night; and for God's sake speak to him, if you think my fears are not exaggerated. Dear Mr. Ferrers, do try and save him from the endless remorse this will bring with it; and from wrecking not only his own life, but that of two others! He has been exasperated by my uncle; he is desperate; and unhappily this foolish young woman has been thrown in his way, and is flattered, I suppose, by his attentions. It is nothing more than this; it *can* be nothing more; but the mad

folly of one hour may destroy the happiness of a whole life-time."

Her earnestness, as she looked up into his face with those mist-troubled eyes, would have moved poor Ferrers to make any promise at that moment.

And then there was a rustle on the stairs, and Lady Trevelyan, turning round, beheld the radiant figure of a woman in white satin, with a blood-red rose in her hair, treading with dainty feet the black polished oak steps, one hand laid lightly on the banister, while the other held up the sharp silvery folds of her dress. Miss Skipton in stage attire followed.

Lady Trevelyan had not yet seen Mrs. Faulconbridge out of black; and she was really dazzled by her brilliant beauty, as she now beheld the young actress. The latter seemed very nervous. She lifted her frightened blue eyes for an instant into Lady Trevelyan's face, and then dropped them; and there she stood, soft, white, and fluttering as a dove, with that grand eagle over her, piercing down to the very soul of the scared young

creature, with large, heavy-lashed, keen grey eyes.

"I am *very* sorry," said Lady Trevelyan, somewhat coldly, "that I am not able to attend the rehearsal."

Mrs. Faulconbridge ought to have replied that *she* was very sorry too, but the words stuck in her throat. She felt she should be so unutterably thankful to be relieved from the burning scrutiny of those eyes!

"I am afraid you are very nervous to-night, Mrs. Faulconbridge?"

"I shall be less so, to-morrow night," she murmured.

"*I'm* horribly frightened—horribly!" said Miss Skipton. And she really did look ghastly, even through her rouge. Lady Trevelyan could not help being struck by it.

"My dear Miss Skipton," she said kindly, and with a certain marked emphasis, "it is so good of you to do *what you are doing*, that we must all pray for your success."—Poor Miss Skipton agitated her eye-glass in a frantic manner.—"The

morning after to-morrow, you know, you will feel so happy, when it is all over—and you have the reward of knowing you have done a kind action."

Lady Trevelyan had added that last sentence to avoid the application of the first part of her speech appearing too pointed. But she had miscalculated its effect. Miss Skipton looked as if she would really have dropped, had not Faulconbridge come up at that moment, and offered his arm to take her to the carriage. Bradley Ferrers followed with Mrs. Faulconbridge. And now George and the rest came hurrying down-stairs, the former with his arm still in a sling, but looking very well as the romantic gardener's son. He was much too hurried, much too excited, to say a word to his cousin, and the gong had already summoned her back to the drawing-room some minutes. She gave one look out into the night through the wide-open door, where the horses were pawing the wet gravel and champing their bits, and the rain was driving steadily, hopelessly down. It seemed to her like the black and starless destiny of the two souls she was watching,

into which those impetuous steeds, their own passions, were driving them. What a fanciful woman this Diana Trevelyan was!

It was well she had to exert herself. Miserable as that evening was, I doubt not it would have been worse had she been alone, with only her disquietude for a companion, no call for restraint and dissimulation. She scarcely knew how she got through dinner, but she managed to listen and to talk, and even to laugh at times; and bethought herself in the evening of some harmless round games, which should obviate the necessity of her taking any active part in conversation. Eleven o'clock came, and Millet brought in candles, and the tray of wine and water; but no one had come back, neither actors nor spectators. Just as the ladies swept through the hall a carriage drove up to the door, and Lord Carrlyon, with John Barnet and two other men, got out. There was a general lingering of the clustered ladies with candles in their hands, to hear how things had gone off. Lord Carrlyon was eloquent in his praise of the general success of the plays.

Every one had acquitted himself creditably; George's acting was quite remarkable. One thing only had been a little disappointing, (here his lordship dropped his voice), the lady—the pretty actress—what's her name?—had been seized with such nervousness that she nearly fainted, and was inaudible during several scenes. "It's what one don't expect in a professional," he added. Several ladies round expressed themselves strongly to the effect that a woman who was paid to do this sort of thing had no business to have nerves.

Lady Trevelyan listened eagerly; but she said nothing. And when she turned round to look for John Barnet, he was gone. Unperceived, and without a word, he had slunk up-stairs.

CHAPTER X.

WAS IT A PHANTOM?

As soon as Lady Trevelyan had reached her own room, she dismissed her maid at once.

"I shall want nothing more, Lacy, I shall probably sit up late—waiting till all the carriages have returned; and I can undress myself. Good-night."

The abigail would have mildly insisted on returning, but her mistress was peremptory. And as soon as Mrs. Lacy was gone, Lady Trevelyan threw a shawl over her shoulders, and walked to the end of the corridor, where a small oak gallery looked down into the hall. She could sit here, concealed, and see what went on below. That was little enough for some time. After an interval a carriage came, and then another, and

set down their freights, who came shivering into the hall, warmed themselves for an instant at the fire, and passed on to the dining-room, where supper was laid. All were returned now; still Lady Trevelyan sat on, immovable.

By-and-by George came out alone. He looked round the hall; he looked up the staircase, and at the dark gallery where his cousin sat. She shrank further back, though she knew he could not see her. After all, he only walked up to the coat-stand, and took down his Inverness cape. It seemed an unnecessary precaution for so trivial an action. And then he crossed the hall, and left it by a door which led quite in an opposite direction from his own room. The offices and servants' rooms, and the tenants' hall, were in this wing, but nothing else.

Where was he going?

The dining-room door opened again a minute afterwards, and Bradley Ferrers came out, took a candlestick, and walked wearily up the great stairs. Lady Trevelyan had been waiting for this. She left the gallery, and met him on the

landing. He started at seeing her there, white and motionless, wrapped in her long black shawl.

"Well, Mr. Ferrers? I could not rest till I had seen you. Have you spoken to him?"

"No. I had really no plausible reason for doing so. He was with the husband almost entirely when he was off the scenes, and apparently on the best terms with him. She was with Miss Skipton in a side room a great part of the time, being evidently ill and nervous. I think your ears are exaggerated."

She shook her head.

"I hope they are. Thank you, Mr. Ferrers. Good-night."

Oh! how obtuse men are in these things, she thought, as she returned to her room and shut the door. Not to see that all this avoidance *now*, when affairs have gone so far, is only a blind. And this friendship for the poor husband. God help him! Bradley Ferrers is a shrewd man in many things, but in such matters he is like a child.

She threw herself into her chair by the fire;

and now the buzz of voices coming down the corridor, past her door, and so onwards, told her that the party below had broken up. She heard Faulconbridge's voice wishing Granfield and Wilmot good night. Then there was the shutting of distant doors, and all was still.

She pushed the hair back from her forehead, and sat there, leaning her head upon her hand, her large eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the fire. This woman, into whose life no blessing of a child had entered, neither the tender love of any young brother or sister, had under that somewhat stately manner of hers a spring of warm passionate human sympathy ever welling up, which was little guessed by the world. Circumstances in her life had tended to repress any outward demonstration of this; she was supposed by many to be rather a dreamy, imaginative, but cold-natured woman. *Elle a la tête chaude, et le cœur froid*, said an analytical Frenchman, who had made unsuccessful love to her. She was the very reverse of this. She was capable of the most passionate love; but since she had reached

her ripe woman's years, it had been no man's happy fate to win this rare jewel. She had, indeed, kept it so closely hidden during the whole of her married life, that few men guessed what the casket held. But in other directions, at least, those who knew her best, knew how intense the *human* quality was in Diana Trevelyan; how she identified herself with the joys and trials of those in whose lives she took an interest. It is well that there should be a few such in this world: so largely dowered by nature, and able, by the absence of closer ties, to give some portion of themselves to those who need sympathy.

She felt keenly what she believed to be the peril of these two young creatures. It was not the first time, alas! she had seen something of this kind. She knew the worldly penalties inflicted on this transgression: she knew what a millstone the young man was probably hanging round his own neck: she knew the ruin it would be to what Sir Richard called his "prospects:" but more, far more than all this, she knew the life-long misery of remorse and self-reproach

which this sin, if it were committed, would entail. She felt tempted to go and throw herself on her knees—she, the proud self-contained Lady Trevelyan—before this unhappy young woman, and supplicate her to pause in her downward course. Unfortunately, this was what she had no right, no power to do. How could she dare to assume that a woman, almost a stranger to her, stood in need of such an appeal as this? She was conscious that there had been a certain increased coldness in her own manner towards Faulconbridge's wife, the more she had learned to know him, and to discover that Mrs. Faulconbridge was quite unworthy to fill the position she did. As she now thought over the past few days, she was conscious of this, I say, and it made any advance towards courting Mrs. Faulconbridge's confidence the more impossible. Had she not tried last evening, and signally failed to draw from her more than monosyllables? No, in this direction, alas! her hands were tied: she was powerless. And as to George—why, her knowledge of human nature made her feel certain

that her cousin would listen to nothing from her upon this subject. A man of two-and-twenty is apt to class the advice of a woman twelve years older than himself with sermons in church, moral essays, and other things theoretically good, but which take too high a standard of poor erring human nature to be practical.

She thought all this, and much more, as she sat there, watching that burning bridge of coal in the grate grow more and more hollow, till it fell inward, with a crash. She rose and heaped on more fuel, and then took to pacing up and down her room. She was far too painfully excited, she knew, to sleep if she went to bed. Not that thinking over this bad business would do any good; but that her mind refused to release its grasp of the subject. She had turned it in every possible manner — no daylight, no remedy anywhere. If it were possible, if it were only possible, that Bradley Ferrers was right after all, and she mistaken!

In one of her turns through the room she came close to the window. Something impelled her—

she scarcely knew what—to open the shutter. She first dropped the thick curtains behind her, however, so that her figure should not be distinguishable against the light room: and then she looked out. The rain had cleared off, and the moon, in her second quarter shone out brightly at intervals, when clear of the long ragged clouds which the wind drove wildly across her face. One minute Lady Trevelyan could see right over the deer-park, and down to the silver edge of the water. The next, she could barely distinguish the sky-outline of the north tower opposite.

In the upper window there was no light. In the lower ones there was a light, which was carried apparently from one room to another. At last it suddenly disappeared altogether. Lady Trevelyan thought it had been put out, when she started to see it flash past one of the arrow-slits which lit the staircase of the north tower. She watched with burning curiosity to see if the light would ascend the stairs. She saw it no more. As it did not *descend* the stairs, there was but

one other course for the person who bore it to have taken.

Lady Trevelyan stepped quickly back, and blowing out her candle as she passed, ran to the door and opened it softly. Using all the caution, however, which she did, it creaked. She looked down the corridor towards the door of communication with the north tower.

For one instant there was a light there, but it was extinguished before she could see more than the long ray it sent down the polished oak panel of the corridor.

She softly closed the door behind her, and stood there, hearing her heart beat loudly, and hearing nothing else. There was not the faintest sound from the further end of the corridor, and all was pitch dark. After a couple of minutes—which seemed like hours, in the excited state of her nerves—she crept out upon the soft velvet carpet which was spread down the centre of the passage, and swiftly, noiselessly she stole to the opposite extremity of it, where two other passages branched off to right and left, where, also, it

broadened into the landing of the great staircase, and where the little gallery we have already mentioned as overlooking the hall, thrust itself out sideways.

For the second time that night, Lady Trevelyan entered this gallery, and seated herself, without the rustle of a fold, in its impenetrable shadow. Whoever came down the main corridor, whether he turned up either of the other passages, or descended the staircase, must be seen from here.

There was an interval of some minutes, and not a sound save the ticking of the old clock in the hall. The embers had not quite died out between the great brass dogs in the grate then; she could see a little ruddy flickering light which struggled within the radius of a yard or two round the chimney-piece. Beyond that, all was black, except where, through the wide mullioned window, the moon, every now and then, between the drifting clouds, shone upon the white stone flooring. Lady Trevelyan's nerves were strung now to the highest pitch. Every sense was strained; but there was no indication that any human being was stirring.

But for that flash of light she might have believed that the whole house was wrapt in peaceful sleep. If she was not mad, or dreaming, however, such she knew could not be the case. There was a mystery; she shuddered to think *what;* but a mystery there was; else why should the light have been blown out, at the sound of an opening door? She must free her mind of the horrible suspicion that haunted it, if she sat there till morning.

Nearly ten minutes elapsed; then there was a movement in the corridor, so slight as never to have been detected but by ears keenly alive to the faintest sound. It was more a *consciousness* that a human being was there, coming nearer and nearer in the pitch darkness, a horrible sensation communicated through every pore in the skin, than anything absolutely heard, perhaps. The person, or persons, had no doubt persuaded themselves that their alarm was groundless. Trusting to the darkness, at all events, they were moving forwards —where?

A pale moonbeam struggled through the shadow

in which everything was wrapt just then, and dimly defined two figures, one in white, swiftly stealing down the stairs. They glided through the great hall; they crossed before the mullioned windows; there was the sound of an opening door, but the moon was again obscured, and the figures were swallowed up in the darkness without Lady Trevelyan being able to tell positively through which door they had passed.

She sprang up: her head reeled round with her. She was obliged to catch hold of the balustrade and stand still for a moment before she could move; and then, regardless of all except the necessity of satisfying her doubts, she ran down the stairs.

The moonlight broke through the mullioned window again, sharper and clearer than before. Lady Trevelyan went from one door to another; they were all locked; such was Mr. Millet's habit at night. There was yet another; that one I have already named, through which Lady Trevelyan had seen George pass an hour previously. She ran towards this, and within a yard of it she stopped dead short. The moonlight flooded the white

stones of the hall, and there at her feet lay what looked a round stain of crimson blood. She stooped and picked it up. It was a single crimson rose-leaf.

With the horror of *certainty* she felt all her strength desert her. She could no more have walked another yard just then than she could have flown. Her knees literally seemed giving way under her, and she slid down upon the cold stones, where she sat motionless.

It was all unavailing. Too late, too late to save!

CHAPTER XI.

BEFORE THE PLAY.

How long Lady Trevelyan remained there, she could scarcely tell afterwards. She remembered, as in a dream, rising at last, and groping her way in the dark, up the stairs to her own room. She could just remember flinging herself upon her bed weary unto faintness with the excitement and overstress upon her nerves; and she could remember no more. With an aching head and a sick heart, numbed with cold, she recovered her consciousness at last; but she had not strength to rise and undress herself. She just drew the eider-down quilt over her; she pulled the shawl closer round her shoulders, and then she fell into a dull heavy sleep, from which she was roused by Mrs. Lacy's entry at eight o'clock. The abigail's astonishment

at seeing her mistress in her dress of the previous evening was changed into sympathy when she looked at her pale face.

"Lor, my lady, you look very ill!"

"I have a headache, Lacy. I cannot go down breakfast. Bring me a cup of tea, and—stay; ask Mrs. Pendarves to step up and speak to me."

"Mrs. Pendarves, my lady, is very unwell this morning and is confined; I mean to her room, my lady, of course."

"What is the matter with her?"

"I don't know, my lady; but I think the play was most too much for her last night. She took on dreadfully when Mr. George deceives Porline, my lady, which *is* a most affecting scene. I'm sure I hadn't a dry eye myself, and Mrs. Pendarves, as Mr. Millet remarked to me, was not at all *like* herself all the evening. Mr. Millet said——"

"Never mind, now, Lacy; go and get me some tea."

Lacy left the room, and meeting Miss Skipton's woman in the passage, that young person stopped to communicate the intelligence that *her* mistress

was also not at all "the thing" this morning. Now when it came to be noised abroad that Mrs. Faulconbridge had not come down to breakfast, and that more than one gentleman was, as James expressed it, "off his feed," the lower table,—that Third Estate in the Constitution of a great house, —began to comment freely upon the remarkable coincidence. The upper table, with the more aristocratic reticence of the Second Estate, confined itself to a genteel wonderment, while Mrs. Lacy suggested as a solution to the mystery, "that something must have been eat last night, that disagreed with so many, from my lady, you see, down to Mrs. Pendarves."

Mrs. Pendarves, however, refused to answer any questions about her health, and resolutely kept her room. Jemima was the prime minister, who had sole access to the person of her aunt, and who transmitted her orders — making a variety of blunders in them.

About twelve o'clock Lady Trevelyan came downstairs. She looked pale and wan, but very handsome. Her beauty, owing little to colour,

lost less than most women's from fatigue and anxiety. After a struggle of bitter and contending thoughts, after asking herself over and over again what course she should take, with the knowledge of the terrible secret she possessed, she came to the conclusion, slowly and reluctantly, that she could do absolutely nothing—for this day at least. It was evident that the guilty pair were in the house: nothing had transpired: the current of everyday life was flowing on as usual. Should she make an *esclandre* by divulging all she knew? To-morrow these wretched plays would be over, and these people gone. And on Monday George would sail—perhaps never again to meet the object of his infatuation. She would speak to him, of course, solemnly, earnestly;—but it must be the following day. In the bustle and excitement of preparation for the great event of this evening, it would produce more harm than good were she to do so. It was with a sick heart, and a sense of horror and loathing, that she rose and dressed herself, and prepared to meet the drama of the day as calmly as she might.

The very first person she met as she turned the handle of the library-door was Faulconbridge. She had schooled herself for this meeting, and yet now that she saw him, the betrayed husband, for whom she felt so warm an interest and regard, and knew how his proud confidence in that weak young wife was misplaced, the blood, in spite of herself, rushed suddenly up into her face, and she stood there, holding the door in her hand, looking strangely confused. But the young man only thought how wonderfully beautiful she was, as she stood thus, and how curiously her head resembled the statue of her great namesake, when startled by Actæon.

Everybody was busy; and nothing pleases people so much on these occasions as having something to do. Lady Trevelyan found a staff of ladies making paper roses and laurel garlands to decorate the boxes. A force of idle men had found something or other to do in arranging tickets and programmes, and helping George to answer the notes which are inevitable at such times. Lady Julia was making a tri-coloured

cockade for Louis Granfield, who, as a republican general, found he wanted this last touch to complete his costume. He held his cocked hat, while she adjusted the ribbons; both of them, of course, in absolute silence, but apparently content. As he afterwards said, when able to unburthen his mind to his male friends, "She is such a deucedly good-natured girl, that. There's nothing she won't do. And she has been so confoundedly set upon, because her sister's a beauty. 'Pon my soul, I like her face much better, and I'm getting to understand her, too." By what process he arrived at this result, it was difficult to tell; however, if she found that she equally well understood him, where was the use of speech on either side?

George seemed more like his old self this morning; that is to say, the gloom which had hung upon his brow during the last two days was quite cleared away. He seemed like a man intoxicated with some great excitement. Etheridge said, languidly, "What a boy Stourton is to be in such a state about these plays!" But, in

point of fact, the boy had suddenly ripened into the man within these last few days. His excitement was not the light-heartedness of boyhood; the lines of energy and determination, whether for good or evil, were discernible in his face to those who had eyes to see. Lady Trevelyan had such eyes; but she looked in vain for any shadow of remorse, or doubt, or fear. The expression her cousin wore was one of insolent happiness, and triumphant resolution. Lady Trevelyan shuddered. Mrs. Faulconbridge sat in the embrasure of a window, her hand in Miss Skipton's, looking hypocritically demure, Lady Trevelyan thought, and uncommonly pretty. Her ladyship was not quite above the prejudices of her sex; and having reason to think ill of the young actress, she fancied now, as she watched her, that every action betrayed an untrue nature, strong only in its greed for admiration.

But after the social duty of moving through this circle, and uttering a certain number of common-places to each lady in turn, Diana Trevelyan had another duty which she considered

it imperative to perform. She directed her steps to the housekeeper's room, where she found Jemima ostensibly engaged over her aunt's accounts,—actually dissolved in tears over a greasy novel. As Lady Trevelyan entered, Jemima started up.

"Jemima, I want to see your aunt. Is she up?"

"Yes, my lady."

"She is in her room, I suppose, but will not mind seeing me, I dare say? I am sorry she is so unwell."

Lady Trevelyan moves towards the inner room without waiting for any very definite reply from the confused Jemima, who, what with the agitation of her novel, and the agitation of a visit from her ladyship, and the agitation of trying to remember *what* she ought to say in such an unexpected event, becomes entirely incapable of saying anything. She takes refuge behind her auburn crop, where she can wipe more than one "*furtiva lagrima*" away with the corner of her apron, and she watches my lady's movements in silent awe.

Mrs. Pendarves cannot conceive why Jemima should knock at the door, and, of course, no one

but Jemima would think of invading her privacy, after the strict orders she has issued: so she calls out pretty loudly for a sick woman near seventy, "Come in!"

Lady Trevelyan enters, and she beholds—Mrs. Pendarves, in a very strange attire, performing genuflexions and other mystic exercises, at the bed-post, with the assistance of—of—may I be allowed the expression?—a pair of long elastic garters! Her faith in the virtue of this performance was little short of a superstition; and a belief had gone abroad that Mrs. Pendarves would as soon think of neglecting her prayers as her gymnastics. When complimented on her upright bearing, and firm, *very* firm tread, she always attributed these valuable possessions to her morning and evening rites; and it was her boast that if she ever felt unwell, which was rare, she made a point of redoubling these, by way of vanquishing her sole and arch enemy, the liver, which from the bitter way in which she spoke of it, might be supposed to stand in the same position towards her body, that Satan did towards her soul.

Her appearance now was little short of appalling. Divested of her brown front, the housekeeper's ruby face appeared beneath a mighty canopy of white linen; while a chin-strap of the same gave her the appearance of carrying her head in a sling. I will not be indiscreet enough to divulge the mysteries of the lower portions of her attire; it is enough to say that her ample person was, in the favourite phrase of old novelists when they describe their heroine's dresses, "displayed to great advantage."

"Good Lor', my lady!" cries the startled Mrs. Pendarves, "I'm not fit—I'm——"

"My good Pendarves, don't the least mind me. Hearing you were unwell, I couldn't help coming to see after you. I hope you are really better? Otherwise we must send for Mr. Squills. I suppose it was the fatigue and the gas, and so on, last night, wasn't it, that affected you?"

"No, my lady, it wasn't, but I'd a bad night," said Mrs. Pendarves, doggedly. "There's things as agree with me and things as disagree with me, I had some of the latter, I suppose. As to

fatigue," she added, with great scorn, "it's not likely that I should tire o' sitting for a *dozen* hours at a *Stourbridge* theatre."

Why the Stourbridge theatre should possess this immunity, or why Mrs. Pendarves should be above the mortal weakness of feeling fatigue there, she did not vouchsafe to explain. She was a clever woman; but then female argument is not close.

"Well, whatever was the cause, Pendarves," said Lady Trevelyan, kindly humouring the old servant, "you are much too important for us to be able to spare you, so pray make haste and get well. Are you sure you won't see Squills?"

"Lor' bless you, no, my lady; I wouldn't have Mr. Squills pouring his nasty messes down *my* throat. *I* know what's the matter with me much better than *he* does. It's liver, my lady. I have it periodical—that is, when anything worrits me, or I'm put out a bit, liver always takes advantage, but, bless you! I get him under as quiet as a lamb, in twenty-four hours."

"I'm sorry you should have had anything to

worry you, Pendarves. I hope the cause no longer exists, or, at all events, that you are no longer worried by it!"

"Well, my lady, 'what can't be cured must be endured;' I shall be pretty near right again after my twenty-four hours," replied the old servant, skilfully evading the inquiry.

"I sincerely hope so. But you are very lucky," said Lady Trevelyan, with a smile, "to be able to reckon so confidently on getting rid of your worries in twenty-four *hours;* I wish we could all take a lesson from you."

"I does my dooty, my lady, to the best o' my understandin', and if I be out o' sorts, I find it ain't any use frettin', for it warn't *my* fault. That's what I says to myself. A blue pill at night takes the worrit out o' me, and an extra turn at the bed-post here makes me as good as noo, in the mornin'."

Lady Trevelyan smiled, and then, clearing her throat, she said, with a little hesitation of manner,—

"Pendarves, I want you to tell me whether, in

this western wing of the house, there are any gentlemen's rooms—any besides the servants' and offices? Mr. George has no room there, has he?"

"No, my lady, he has not."

Mrs. Pendarves answered shortly and decisively, and looked Lady Trevelyan full in the face as she spoke. The lady went on rather flurriedly.

"I know nothing of this part of the house, except your rooms and the offices, so that I was not sure whether, being pressed for room, you might not have put some of the young men into this wing."

"No, my lady, we have not," rejoined the housekeeper, as stonily as before.

The one point of mystery therefore to Lady Trevelyan, as to where the two figures she had seen the previous night could have been going, was as far from being cleared up as ever. After a few minutes' more conversation on indifferent matters, she left Mrs. Pendarves to the completion of her toilet.

It seemed to Lady Trevelyan that every one she

spoke to must read her knowledge of that guilty secret in her face. She shrank especially from Faulconbridge every time he approached her, and throughout the bustle of that day he did so frequently. The excitement agreed with him apparently; she had never known him in better spirits. It shocked her to see him and George upon their accustomed terms of intimacy. She could forgive almost everything sooner than this duplicity of her cousin's; and as he evidently avoided her, it was clear to Lady Trevelyan that he suspected her of some knowledge of his conduct.

To more persons than Lady Trevelyan, that day was not a pleasant one; but it came to an end at last. The play was, after all, as it turned out, a blessing, for it was an inexhaustible theme of conversation and vent for energy; and it brought that long afternoon to a close much earlier than anything else would.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLAY.

Before eight o'clock the theatre was full. The pit had been made into stalls, and every place was taken by the "gentility" of Stourbridge and its neighbourhood. The central boxes of the first tier were occupied by the Stourton Towers party, where Sir Richard, flanked by Ladies Granfield and Bideford, was in a conspicuous position. All the ladies had front places, and behind them sat the men. In an obscure corner, however, Lady Trevelyan had ensconced herself, saying that the gas hurt her eyes; and from behind her large green fan the pale classical head, with its grave eyes bent fixedly on the stage, was watched with keen interest by more than one that evening. Beside her sat John Barnet, to whom she occa-

sionally addressed a remark upon the performance; but though he made one or two efforts to be jocular, he was evidently abstracted, and quite unlike himself. So long as George or Mrs. Faulconbridge were on the stage, Barnet watched it with interest; when they had left it, he leant back, and folded his arms, and frowned at the chandelier.

The excitement behind the curtain was of course great. Perhaps the only person who remained unmoved in the midst of all that bustle of carpenters, and scene-shifters, and hair-dressers, and prompters, and women with sal volatile, and men with sherry, and the hum of that "genteel" crowd, like a swarm of unseen bees, on the other side of the curtain, was Bradley Ferrers. The greenish hue of the poor barrister's face was hidden under his make-up as Mons. Deschappelles; but the expression was one of grave endurance, incapable of suffering much variety from the vicissitudes of the evening's entertainment. He looked through the hole in the curtain once or twice; but when some one asked him if the house was

full yet, he did not know. He had only seen that pale head in the shadow of the box opposite.

The curtain drew up. Poor Miss Skipton was quite inaudible at first, and vociferous applause seemed in no way to encourage her.

"Speak up, ma'am," roared Mr. Wraggles. "They can't hear!"—which certainly did not apply to *him*.

"Turn your face more towards the audience," whispered Mrs. Faulconbridge.

Perhaps Miss Skipton's trepidation was serviceable to her friend. Nothing gives courage to the female breast like the nervousness of another woman. At all events, from whatever cause it was, the young actress was as self-possessed, after the first few minutes, as it was possible to expect a novice should be. She seemed conscious that everything depended on her, and as the play proceeded, and her scenes with Claude Melnotte came on, her courage rose, and her determination that for this evening—even if she should never tread the boards again—she would throw herself heart and soul into the part, and not disappoint those

who expected so much from her. She had been paralyzed last evening, while Miss Skipton was comparatively in possession of all her faculties; but now their positions were changed. Mrs. Faulconbridge knew that unless she forgot everything for the moment, except the subject in hand, so that her acting should be spontaneous and unembarrassed, George would never get through his part creditably. Perhaps—who shall say?—this may have stimulated her exertions more than any thirst for applause herself.

The first act passed off very fairly, but George, as some of his sporting friends expressed it, "kept himself dark." It was only towards the end of the second act that he began to warm. It was then that his passionate delivery of the speeches assigned to Claude in his interview with Pauline made the audience overlook the want of stage presence, and other shortcomings, wherein George was pretty much like all amateurs.

"He really does seem so in earnest!" as good old Lady Granfield observed to Sir Richard. The baronet frowned slightly, and "pshaw'd;" but,

upon the whole, I think his vanity was pleased at the figure George made, and the general impression he left.

"He is very much what I remember you, Sir Richard, in your gay days," whispers Lady Bideford, behind her fan. "You had just those eyes and hair when I remember seeing you at the opera with the Prince—we won't say *how* many years ago. You were making great play then with a certain married lady. *I* remember all about it. Oh, fie!"

Lady Bideford tries to look prudish, but Lady Trevelyan, who overhears the speech from her seat behind, shudders at the parallel.

Claude is saying at that moment to Pauline,—

"'Have you no scruple—no fear? Speak—it is not yet too late.'"

"'When I loved thee, thy fate became mine,'" replies Pauline. "'Triumph or danger, joy or sorrow, I am by thy side.'"

Lady Trevelyan involuntarily turned her face towards John Barnet, and their eyes met.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much,"

said Sir Richard, with a sarcastic smile. However, he applauded with the rest of the house at the end of the act, and acknowledged to Lady Bideford that "the actress is really an uncommonly attractive young woman; a vast deal too good for her husband."

"As Mr. Stourton seems to think," rejoined her ladyship, with a knowing smile.

The third act increased the enthusiasm of the public for the lovely Pauline; her tenderness, her wrongs, the manner in which she contrived to enlist all sympathies by the intonation of her voice, and the look of her "haunting eyes," as Claude calls them—made the gallery of Stourbridge butchers and bakers vehement in their indignation against Melnotte. George found himself only restored to popularity in the next act, where a fine melodramatic situation is assigned him of rescuing Pauline from the hands of Beauséant, by "dashing him"—so the stage instructions direct—"to the other end of the stage." Etheridge had stipulated for a very mitigated "dashing," but in the excitement of the moment George did

actually fulfil the commands of the author upon the person of Beauséant's representative so literally as to bring down a round of applause from the gods. I do not think Etheridge has forgiven him to this day. That superfine gentleman's acting throughout this scene was so frigid that it seemed to rouse Mrs. Faulconbridge to the exhibition of more power, in her withering contempt, than she had yet shown. The force with which she spoke the words, "Know that I would rather starve *with him who has betrayed me*, than accept your lawful hand," sent a shiver through Lady Trevelyan; and once more her eyes met John Barnet's.

Mrs. Faulconbridge had what the papers call an ovation at the end of the play. There were those present who will never forget her look as she was led on by George Stourton, all her courage, as it seemed, having deserted her with the last words she had to speak. George, flushed and excited, with the smile of triumph on his lips, half dragging (such was her reluctance to appear again) the pale, bewildered-looking young

woman across the stage. She seemed scarcely conscious that half this waving of handkerchiefs and clapping of hands was for her; and having dropped back again into private life, the position seemed to distress far more than to gratify her. Faulconbridge, however, was evidently pleased by his wife's triumph. He took her in his arms as she left the stage, and then she fairly gave way, and burst into tears. Her husband, with a kind word or two, relinquished her into the hands of Miss Skipton, and went round to the front to try and have a few words with Lady Trevelyan. And so, after the farce, of which we need say nothing, the evening's entertainment came to a close.

"Good night, and good-by, Lady Trevelyan," said Barnet, holding out his hand. "I leave Stourton Towers very early to-morrow morning—before breakfast—and shall not see you. I meant to have had a very jolly time of it here, but somehow—I dare say you can guess why—my fun has been a good deal spoilt. Now I'm going back to work hard in my parish, and my only

amusement for the next six months will be teaching the boys cricket. Do you know the difference between round-hand and under-hand bowling? Well, I'm a round-hand bowler in everything, Lady Trevelyan. Perhaps if I could bowl under-hand sometimes it would be better, but I *can't*. You'll hear me awfully abused, Lady Trevelyan, when I'm gone—men often are behind their backs—but I hope you'll stick up for me. I've tried to do right, I assure you, but I've been placed in a conf——in a very difficult position."

"I believe it thoroughly, Mr. Barnet," said Lady Trevelyan, shaking his hand warmly. "I know that your position must have been difficult, and I am confident you have done what you *could*. If you have failed unfortunately, it is not your fault."

Barnet looked as if he wished to reply to this, but stopped himself. They shook hands once more, and Lady Trevelyan stepped into her carriage.

This took place on the steps of the theatre. It was past one o'clock when all the party returned to Stourton Towers.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE EPILOGUE.

THERE was a fine supper awaiting them in the dining-room, upon which most of the guests fell to, with appetites sharpened by five hours' pursuit of pleasure in a suffocating atmosphere. Every one found a seat as he could, there was not much of standing upon order in the disposition of place; Faulconbridge, consequently, slipped into the chair beside Lady Trevelyan without attracting attention. Opposite them were George and Mrs. Faulconbridge. "For the last time," repeated Lady Trevelyan to herself. "Thank heavens! they go to-morrow. George cannot leave us till the end of the week, and he sails on Monday."

Perhaps this reflection, grieved and deeply interested as she was for the young man beside her,

made her converse with him more than she had chosen to do during the last two or three days. She spoke of his future in the theatrical world, and that of his wife, with a tender matronly solicitude, which made Edgar smile — not the unpleasant, cynical smile, however, which Lady Trevelyan disliked to see; and yet she sighed to think that this man, with all his cleverness, should be so incapable of realizing the dangers of his foolish young wife's position. And so they talked on; and she poured her wise, womanly advice into his ears, which were nothing loth to listen to that soft voice, be the words what they might.

Then came speeches and the drinking of healths. A ponderous speech from Lord Granfield, proposing Sir Richard's health, and coupling it with George's, thus:—"As to his nephew and heir, my gallant young friend here, on my left, who is called on suddenly to—a—serve his country in distant lands, but upon whose excellent—a—heart, we are confident that neither the heat of Canada nor the cold of India—I mean the cold of

Canada nor the heat of India—will have any—a —a—deleterious influence. We have all—a—seen to-night—hum—with—with what grace, and, I may say, *effect*, he can sustain the—the part of a—hum—of an ardent lover." (Great cheering.) "Let me hope—I repeat, let me express a hope that the next time I have the—a—pleasure of finding myself at this—a—hospitable board, my—my gallant young friend here may have—a—hum —enacted, yes, enacted this part with such success that—that"—(cries of "Hear, hear," with much laughter)—"that I may have the *satisfaction*, ladies and gentlemen, of—a—hum—of being presented to a—*Mrs.* George Stourton." (Renewed cheering.) "I repeat, ladies and gentlemen, that I *hope* this—I earnestly hope that upon our young friend's return from foreign service he may—a—hum—be inclined to bind the—a—myrtle—shall we say the myrtle and the rose? with the laurels, yes, the *laurels* he will no doubt have won." (Great cheering.) "I repeat that I *hope* this, ladies and gentlemen, because I believe that nothing will—will—conduce to our hospitable

friend Sir Richard Stourton's happiness, so much—a—hum—as greeting his nephew's bride, I may say—a—*daughter*, to this house. I beg, therefore, in—a—proposing to you the health of our worthy host, to couple with—a—his name, that of—a—hum—his nephew, Mr. George Stourton, to whom we are all—a—indebted for so much amusement this evening; and—a—hum—I would add the—a—sentiment—a—with your permission, *may he not long remain single.*" (Vociferous cheering and much laughter.)

Lady Trevelyan, who felt the blood come and go upon her face during this speech, looked up at George when it was over. He was a little pale, perhaps, and his eyes were bent upon his plate, while Sir Richard, in a few vapoury words, returned his thanks, when George started to his feet, and looked round him with a smile.

"I beg to thank you," he said, "for the honour you have done me in drinking my health. If I am not yet in the position in which the noble lord is good enough to say he wishes to see me, why perhaps it is not *entirely* my fault. And on my

return from India, should any lady have taken pity on my condition in the interval, I can only hope the noble lord will honour my choice with his approval. In return, I beg to propose to you the health of the noble lord himself, and his son's, my friend, Mr. Louis Granfield. And as it's a pity that good advice should be thrown away, I vote that he shows us by example, as soon as possible, how good his noble father's precepts are." (Cheers and laughter.) "It's like hunting: it wants a fellow with the pluck to give a lead over the biggest fence in life, ladies and gentlemen; and if he don't show *me* the way, I suppose I shall be obliged to show *him*. I propose the health of Lord Granfield, and his son, Mr. Louis Granfield, and *may the latter not long remain single!*"

This speech met with great applause. It was lively, and diplomatic, and vague, and it turned the tables upon poor Louis, who was six or eight years George's senior, with complete success. But to some present the speech was unsatisfactory enough. Sir Richard probably derived small com-

fort from the prospect held out of his nephew's finding a wife for himself "*in the interval*" between his departure and his return; while Lady Trevelyan thought her cousin's impudence, under the circumstances, in the worst taste.

Other speeches, of course, followed. It was past two o'clock when the ladies rose, and Sir Richard signified his intention of retiring also, leaving it, of course, to the other men to do as they liked. Lady Trevelyan was struck at the moment, and remembered long afterwards, that George came up to his uncle, and bade him "good-night" with a nearer approach to his old manner than he had shown lately; indeed, since that stormy drive home from the station yesterday, they had not exchanged words. But now, as Sir Richard extended a hand somewhat coldly, while he looked at his nephew with still implacable eyes, the latter held it for an instant in his, as though the idea crossed his mind of the possibility of "making friends." If so, he quickly dismissed it, as entirely impracticable. But Lady Trevelyan fancied she saw a desire on his part to come

across and speak to *her* also, whom he had been avoiding so studiously ever since his return. As she was not at all disposed to have any intercourse with her cousin until the Faulconbridges should have left the house, she turned away and walked upstairs with some of the other ladies, and abstained from even looking back. To-morrow,—to-morrow she would speak to George: yes, as much as he liked, when these people were gone. *Now* she was too much saddened and disgusted by the hypocritical profligacy of this very young man, to say a word to him, if she could help it.

She slept that night. Worn out in body and mind, she rose from her knees, where she prayed that *all* might be delivered "from evil," and laying down her head upon the pillow, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

She did not dream. Could she have beheld, as some are said to have done in dreams, events that were passing at that time in another portion of the house, she would have started up and slept no more. But the crisis, as far as *she* was concerned, was past. The shame and horror of the

previous night could not be repeated for her. With the knowledge of that guilty secret, there was nothing more to be learnt, nothing more to be dreaded, for the moment, so far as she could foresee. God forgive them, and lead them back into the straight path! With that prayer, and one for the injured husband, she fell asleep.

It was broad daylight when she woke—sunshine flooding the room, birds calling to each other from the trees outside her window. The great clock struck seven. She rose, and throwing on her dressing-gown, opened her window. The window of Mrs. Faulconbridge's room in the tower opposite was open too, and her husband was looking out of it. Lady Trevelyan drew quickly back behind the curtain. Then she heard steps on the gravel below. Two men were talking eagerly as they went by—the head-groom and one of the gardeners, as Lady Trevelyan could just distinguish; and then all was silent again.

Presently she heard, or fancied she heard, unusual symptoms of animation in the house at

that hour. A buzz of voices in the hall, rapid steps up and down the stairs, a whispering in the corridor, and more than once a stopping of women (as she knew by the rustle of their gowns) opposite her own door. They passed on, however; and she sat there, wondering whether anything unusual had happened, or whether it was her excitable imagination only which gave these ordinary sounds a significance this morning.

Suddenly Sir Richard's bell — she knew its sharp, irritable sound—rang violently; his room was immediately below hers, and she always heard it. This time there could be no mistake. Something must have occurred to rouse him at this hour—something important. He could not be ill, she thought, from the vigour of that peal; but it was impossible to remain longer in this state of uncertainty. She rang her own bell.

Full ten minutes elapsed. In that interval she heard a horse gallop out of the stables in one direction, and she saw a dog-cart drive across the park in the other; and, sick with growing fright, she sat there, gathering with tremulous hands the

masses of black hair into its net, for she could not wait for her maid.

At last the door opened, and Mrs. Lacy entered. She was evidently breathless to say something, but after the manner of maids, could not be sufficiently long in bringing it out.

"Lacy, what *is* the matter? What has Sir Richard been ringing for, at this hour?"

"Oh, my lady, I've reely hardly strenth to tell you the noos. The most shockin' thing——"

"Speak out, woman, for Heaven's sake!"

"It turned me quite fainty when I heard it, my lady; and I know it will shock your ladyship terribly. I reely hardly know. . . . ."

Lady Trevelyan saw it was no use. She sank into a chair, and pressed her hands tightly together, waiting until her maid chose to speak. Then Mrs. Lacy, fearing that her words might lose their due effect, did at last go on.

"My lady, Mr. George has gone off."

"Gone off?"

"Yes, my lady. Oh, dear, it's a bad business. He's gone off with Mrs. Faulconbridge."

Lady Trevelyan started to her feet, pale and trembling.

"Good God! Is this really so?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. They went off by the mail-train at half-past four this mornin', so it appears. His groom drove them in the brougham to the station, quite in common course like; only he had the carriage waitin' in the park ever since Mr. George came back from the theatre—a matter of two hours, he says. Oh, it's a shockin' business, ain't it, my lady; and an actress, too! The husband——"

"What of him?"

"He seems stunned-like, from what Mr. Millet tells me. It was him gave the first alarm; but since then he's done nothin' but sit in her room, walkin' up and down, and starin' out of window. He don't seem to take on much, Mr. Millet says; but these actors, my lady, as I said, haven't the refined feelins of other people. Oh, dear, it's a shockin' business!"

"What has Sir Richard done?" asked Lady Trevelyan, in a low voice.

"Sir Richard has sent right and left, my lady, to find out which direction they had taken, though Mr. George's groom told Mr. Millet they'd gone to the station, and taken tickets for London. Oh, it's a shockin' business, to be sure. Will you please to wear your puce dress, or your grey glassy, my lady?"

Lady Trevelyan did not even hear Mrs. Lacy's inquiry. She had buried her head in her hands, and was trying to realize this dreadful truth, and its consequences. The great clock struck eight. The sound grated harshly on her ears; but it roused her to the necessity of present exertion. In less than two hours, the circle of gay guests would be assembled round the breakfast-table. What was to be done? What was the course of action to be pursued? She must see her uncle as soon as possible. Heedless of the purling stream of Mrs. Lacy's discourse, Lady Trevelyan dressed as fast as she could, and hurried down stairs.

"Is Sir Richard in his room? Can I see

him?" she asked his valet, who was with Mr. Millet in the ante-room.

Sir Richard was closeted with Mr. Faulconbridge, and had given strict orders that he was not to be interrupted.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEFERRED RECKONING.

YES; at half-past eight, upwards of an hour after Mr. Millet had broken the news to his master, the baronet sent a message requesting the favour of Mr. Faulconbridge's presence in Sir Richard's morning-room. And as Faulconbridge was waiting, prepared for this summons, no time was lost in answering it.

The baronet was seated at his writing-table, dressed, shaved, oiled, with his usual scrupulous care. No mark of hurry, or undue excitement, except perhaps in the increased redness of his face. A good fire burned in the grate at his back; the bright March sun shone in at the window on his right; a more comfortable and

cheerful-looking room for the transaction of an ugly piece of business never was.

"Mr. Faulconbridge, sir, pray be seated" (with a gracious wave of the hand. What a change since the *hauteur* of yesterday!). "This is a most unfortunate affair. I assure you I sympathize with you in your misfortune, Mr. Faulconbridge; and, indeed, you may well believe that for my *own* sake, I—I deplore this beyond measure. May I inquire what steps you mean to take?"

"None."

"Ah, exactly; very wise: pursuit is of course entirely vain; and as to any *ulterior* proceedings, eh? . . . ."

"There are none necessary, that I know of."

"True. You probably feel that as the—the lady has thought fit to leave you, it will be as well to make the affair as little public as possible, eh?"

"The affair must soon be public enough, Sir Richard."

"But it need not come to a trial," said the baronet, quickly. "It need not come to a trial,

Mr. Faulconbridge. If it is damages you—you expect, very naturally expect, I will undertake that you shall have more from me than any jury, under the circumstances, would award. Without wishing to—to wound your feelings, Mr. Faulconbridge—pray, understand *that*—you must be aware that an actress is in a different position, and so forth, from other—ladies. A jury would never give you more than a couple of thousand pounds damages. Now, I am willing to secure you six thousand down, if you will not sue for a divorce."

The young man folded his arms, and looked at the old one seated before him (Faulconbridge remained standing all the time), with a smile of quiet contempt.

"Explain to me fully why you desire this, Sir Richard, before I give you my answer."

There was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush. Sir Richard saw that. He fumbled with his pen, and avoided Faulconbridge's eye, as he answered,—

"You might easily guess, sir. Unless you pro-

cure a divorce, my nephew, of course, cannot *marry* your wife."

"The lady who passed as my wife and your nephew are already married."

Had a thunderbolt fallen in the room, the shock to Sir Richard Stourton could hardly have been greater.

He pushed back his chair violently from the table, nearly upsetting the ink-stand, as he dashed pens and papers from him. His face was literally purple. He glared at the sardonically calm man opposite him with bloodshot eyes; but it was some minutes before he could frame a single word. At last, in a low, thick voice, he broke forth,—

"What d——d piece of trickery is this? What do you mean by 'the lady who *passed* as your wife?'"

"I mean my sister."

"Your *sister?*"

"The grandchild of Teresa Conti, Sir Richard Stourton, as I am."

All the colour fled out of Sir Richard's face. He

made an effort to move, or to speak, but no sound came. The clear incisive tone of the young man's voice, not raised a jot above its ordinary pitch, but speaking more slowly than his wont, fell on the ears that would fain have shut themselves, if they could, to words which burnt into his very brain.

"Teresa Conti is dead, Sir Richard Stourton. That admirable woman kept her promise to you as long as she lived; but it could not extend beyond the grave. Perhaps you have not heard her name for nearly forty years? It is well that you should hear it once more before you die, and from *my* lips. You need not be afraid that I mean to thrust the fact of our relationship before the world. The story of my wrongs shall be kept close—not out of regard to your feelings, but because it is out of your power to redeem the past, as far as I am concerned. You cannot call back to life and honour the brave and noble woman whom you deceived so basely; you cannot bring back my father, the child whom you abandoned five and forty years ago. I would accept nothing at your hands; I would not take all the gold you

could give me. Let the tie between us, from this day forwards, be as though it did not exist. I have wrought out a rude kind of retributive justice—justice not *revenge*, mark you, to Teresa Conti's memory, myself. In spite of all your efforts, her descendants shall yet possess Stourton Towers. Her grand-daughter is now married to your nephew. Nothing can prevent her children, if she have any, from inheriting this old family property. She is already in the position which your pride would have filled with the daughter of some noble race. And *this* marriage, Sir Richard Stourton, let me tell you, is no fictitious one. Here is the clergyman's certificate. It was duly solemnized (registered), and witnessed. Not all the bench of bishops could annul it."

"It *shall* be annulled!" burst out Sir Richard, with a tremendous oath, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table; "if I spend my last sixpence on it. It's illegal. It's an infernal piece of roguery. He didn't know who she was. She was married under her wrong name — he *couldn't* know it. I won't believe it. By G—d!

I'll cut down every stick of timber on the estate, if it's true! But it *isn't* true: it's some rascally plant of yours, you scoundrel. When—when do you pretend to say they were married? And how? Answer me that, sir."

"They were married in your chapel the night before last, at the hour of half-past two. John Barnet married them. Miss Skipton and I were witnesses. Mrs. Pendarves should have been the first witness. . . . Perhaps you remember that she was present, as a very young woman, at a ceremony she believed then to be a genuine marriage? This, which *was* genuine, was the proper sequel to that wicked deed. But we could not persuade your scrupulous old servant to act, as she considered it, against you, by witnessing an act which would incur your reproaches. We spent some time fruitlessly with her; and were obliged to content ourselves at last with Miss Skipton alone. Mrs. Pendarves, however, can bear testimony to the events of that night. They will stand the searching light of day, Sir Richard. George brought down the special licence from

London; and his friend, knowing that if *he* did not read the service for them, some one else *would*, removed the chief objection to an elopement by marrying them at once."

Sir Richard literally ground his teeth. "I'll have his gown stripped off him!"

"No," said Edgar, quietly; "you won't. What Barnet did was amply justified by precedent. To have acted otherwise would have been to exceed his duties. My sister was married under her right name. With the circumstances of our story, and my motives in passing ourselves off as man and wife, I fully acquainted George Stourton last Saturday night. I had had time, then, to judge of his character; to make up my mind that I would entrust to his keeping the most valuable possession I had—my dear sister's happiness." (Sir Richard here writhed upon his chair.) "I saw that he was struggling against his admiration for my *wife*—as he believed her then to be. I told him all. I didn't then expect so speedy a termination to the affair. I thought if he was worth his salt, and really cared for my

sister, that, sooner or later, he would marry her, in spite of everybody and everything, and in the meantime I swore him to secrecy. But circumstances favoured us singularly. The order for foreign service which George received the next morning, and your injudicious urgency that he should choose a wife before he sailed, brought matters to a crisis. If he has married clandestinely, it is your fault, Sir Richard. He knew all the obstacles you would throw in his way, though you could not have prevented it; and, whether secretly or openly, he had made up his mind to marry no other woman but Nina Conti."

He paused for an instant, and, drawing a step nearer, he leant both hands upon the table, and bent forward a little towards Sir Richard, his dark eyes fixed gravely and keenly upon the baronet's.

"That name," continued Faulconbridge, in a lower voice, "should have a solemn sound in your ears. You are an old man, and cannot have long to live. For myself, I have already said, you can do nothing. When I leave your presence this

morning, you may rest secure from any further intrusion on my part. But for this other child—this other descendant of yours and Teresa Conti's, this innocent girl, who will now become openly, before the world, a member of your family, married, as she is, to your heir and adopted son—consider, Sir Richard Stourton, whether you may not yet, even at the eleventh hour, make some amends for all the misery your life has caused, by receiving her at once, and acknowledging George's marriage before he and his wife sail for India. It is done: nothing you can do can alter the fact—they are married. You may not live to see them return; and though your receiving his wife can confer no positive good on George, it will make him happy. He is not unmindful of what he owes you, and he will be sorry to leave Europe with any bitterness of spirit between you and him. His voyage out will be unclouded by a single shadow, if you will frankly and at once extend your hand."

Sir Richard had had time to recover some command over himself. A cold sneer settled down

upon his face, under cover of which he masked the rage he felt.

"Have you quite done, sir? Whatever I may mean to do, I shall not discuss my private affairs with an impostor who has thrust himself into my house under a disgraceful pretence. I don't believe in your being the person you represent yourself, nor in your trumped-up story. It savours of the green-room and foot-lights. There was a lady I knew, many years ago, of the name of Conti, but she died long before you can have been born, which is quite sufficient to prove that your whole story is a fabrication. My nephew is an infernal young fool, to have been taken in as he has—if what you say about his marriage is not as false as all the rest; but you may take your oath, sir, that I shall try and free him from this cursed entanglement, if possible. I have nothing more to say to you. The sooner you leave my house the better. The butler will pay you the money you are owed."

"The butler can hardly *clear my score*, which, with its arrears, is a long one," said Faulcon-

bridge, sternly. "It would be in my power, through these papers I hold in my hand, to make you pay a heavy portion of it. The penalties of the law for a false marriage—even though contracted so many years ago—are severe. When I entered this house a fortnight ago, above all, when I found that age had so little changed you, my heart hardened itself to make you suffer to the full. You may thank George and your niece Lady Trevelyan that I have *not* done so, and never shall do so now. I owe the latter a personal debt of gratitude; and the former has secured to my sister a position which may appease the outraged memory of our grandmother. But the debtor-and-creditor account between us is better not mentioned, Sir Richard Stourton. You might find it awkward, were I to show it to your butler. There is only one person to whom I shall explain my position, before I leave your house—leave it, never to return! That person is your niece. I tell you this frankly; and I warn you that I shall substantiate my story by papers which cannot leave its truth in doubt for a moment. When

this is done, my lips are sealed. I hope and believe that when the first heat of your anger is past, you will yet forgive George, and not repel your own flesh and blood, in the person of his wife. In this hope, I take my leave of you—for ever."

And, without waiting for a reply, he turned, and left the room.

The measure of command Sir Richard had retained over his features during the last speech passed away, as the door closed behind Edgar Faulconbridge. He paced the room, in his impotent rage, followed, as it seemed to him, whenever he looked up at the picture over the mantelpiece, by the dark eyes of Teresa Conti. He could not escape from them: and yet Sir Richard was not an imaginative man. Neither was he a man to submit to the temporary impression such a delusion might produce.

A quarter of an hour later, he rang the bell violently, and summoned Mrs. Pendarves.

CHAPTER XV.

A GRANDSON'S INHERITANCE.

BEFORE nine o'clock, the news had, of course, through the many-mouthed channel of servants, reached every ear in the house. The sleepiest man, though he might resent his servant's entrance with hot water, and the irritating flood of light admitted into his room by the sharp drawing up of the blind at another time, forgave it when these offences were accompanied by information of the extraordinary scandal just discovered. No passion is more universal, perhaps, in the human breast, than the love of news. If the news be of a very unusual character, the keen pleasure it affords to some people is really hardly to be surpassed among the enjoyments to which such natures are limited: and among idlers at

country houses these are numerous. Curiosity to learn further particulars, to canvass, dilate, and marvel over the event of the past night, gave an impetus to the movements of most guests that morning. Before ten o'clock, even Etheridge was downstairs; and there, in the dining-room, in groups of twos and threes, the party was discussing the affair, waiting anxiously for Lady Trevelyan's appearance, to throw some new light on it, if possible. The sun streamed in upon the silver urn, and snow-white table, laden with every tempting invitation to break the night's fast; but the hunger for gossip was stronger still. At last Millet came in, with a manner bland, dignified, and mellowed to suit the occasion, and informed the party that neither Lady Trevelyan nor Sir Richard Stourton would be down to breakfast. It was a great shock to those who had to start immediately after that meal. Indeed, every one was going before luncheon: and it is but fair to say that those whose delicacy of feeling preponderated over their curiosity, felt that the sooner they were out of the house the better.

But long before the luncheon-bell sounded, a second event had come to startle every one into forgetting the first.

Lady Trevelyan was in her boudoir, with her back to the light, seated in a low chair, reading a manuscript, copied in the finest Italian hand. Edgar Faulconbridge sat opposite, watching her, and occasionally answering or suggesting an observation upon the subject of the document. His attitude was one of keen anxiety, and the sunlight falling full upon his face, revealed every varying phase of expression on the broad, knit brow and sharply chiselled features. The lady, on the other hand, sitting in shadow, was, as it were, half-masked.

The document she read ran thus :—

"TURIN, 18*th August*, 1856.

"I ENTER my sixty-third year this day. The time draws nigh, I know, my dearest boy, that we must part. The signs of gradual, but rapid decay are not to be mistaken by one to whom the idea of death has been long familiar, and who, by

faith in God, does not dread its approach. It is necessary that you should know, when I am gone, certain circumstances in my past life which have as yet been concealed from you, and which may affect, for good or evil, your position in the world. Had your temperament and character been different from what they are, my boy (you will read these lines when I am gone, and will not take offence at your dead grandmother's words), I should have told you this story of my life long ago. But your pride, your impetuosity, no less than your love for me, and all the generous elements of your nature, made me dread your taking some mad, irrevocable step, had I unburthened my heart to you when your father was taken from us.

"You are now two-and-twenty. You have been sent forth from me into the world, and have returned—if not unscathed, yet, I pray to God, and I believe, more fortified against temptation—with greater mastery over your passions, than had you trod during these years the blameless and narrow path of ignorance (which is but

a coward kind of innocence) with me and your young sister. Your heart, though not chastened yet, I fear, to bear whatever cross of sorrow or humiliation God sees fit to send it, with patience, has known the bitter sting of remorse, my Edgar: and this may help to make you set watch, not on your tongue and hand—not on your whole *body* only—but on your *soul*. Wisdom is not the growth of a day. I cannot expect that your judgment shall have obtained complete mastery over your feelings. But the time is come when I must leave this in God's hands, to direct you as He sees fit. I have to tell you the truth before I die.

"All that you know of my youth as yet, Edgar, is that I was born and educated in England, where my father, an exile, of good birth but decayed fortune, gave lessons in music, and left me an orphan at fifteen. My mother, who was English and a Protestant, in which faith I was brought up, died when I was much younger, and the opera singers, among whom I was thrown a good deal, soon discovered that I had a voice, and

indications of some dramatic talent. I was saved, at that very early age, from a career which I now know to be full of peril for a young, unfriended girl, by my father's best friend and patroness. Alas! what peril was not that excellent woman the means of subjecting me to! But thus inscrutable are the ways of Providence. I might have been safer at sixteen on the boards of the Italian Opera than I was in the house of Lady Margaret Stourton.

"She and her husband, with their children, resided chiefly in the country, at Stourton Towers, though they came up to London for three months every year, when Lady Margaret went to court, and gave two grand concerts at the family house in Cavendish Square, and cultivated the society of the leading musicians of the day. She was *fanatica per la musica*—could never have enough of it, and was herself a very skilful executant on the harp. It followed, that as Sir George Stourton allowed Lady Margaret to do just as she liked in everything, there was a constant succession of what the country neighbours called *Squallinis* at

Stourton Towers; and great dissatisfaction, I fear, my poor dear friend gave by her preference for this kind of society. My father, who was not *only* an admirable master, but a perfect gentleman, was a favourite with Sir George, as well as with Lady Margaret. I paid a long visit to Stourton Towers with the former, just before his death; and the extraordinary fancy Lady Margaret conceived for the little dark-eyed girl, who could sing anything at sight, and recite whole cantos of Tasso by heart, prompted her generous offer of a home to me when I was left without one. She assured me that my knowledge of foreign languages alone would make me a valuable companion to her daughter; that the obligation would be mutual: in short, I was but a child, though with the heart of a woman, and I accepted her offer thankfully. Had I been older, wiser, I might have known that such an anomalous position could only bring with it grief and humiliation.

"Her daughter——"

"I come here to the mention of my mother's name," said Lady Trevelyan, in a low voice,

laying down the paper on her knee. "Shall I read on? Are you sure I ought to do so?"

"Quite sure. You will read no ill of the women of the house of Stourton."

She took up the manuscript again.

——"Her daughter was four years younger than I: and at that age the difference is great. She was in everything a child still—a bright, joyous, thoughtless child; while I, as I have said, was, in one respect at least, beginning to feel as a woman. We were, of course, a great deal together. I was very fond of little Di; but companions we could not be called. It was Lady Margaret who was my real companion. Dear Lady Margaret! How good she was to me, and how I loved her! Thank Heaven, as long as she lived, no grief ever came to her through me, that I am aware of.

"Three sons and this daughter alone remained out of a large family Lady Margaret had borne her husband. The eldest son, Henry, was six-and-twenty, and looked more like his mother's brother, so fresh and youthful was her appearance

beside this tall, muscular son. The second was three years younger, but as tall and muscular, and very much handsomer; indeed, Richard Stourton, when I first saw him, was the handsomest man I had then looked on. But that was before my father's death. When I came to live under the Stourton roof, the two brothers were abroad, making the grand tour with a tutor, after leaving Oxford; nor did they return until more than a year later. Five intervening children between Richard and Diana were dead. After her, came the third surviving son, and last child—a boy, of seven years old, utterly unlike his brothers in every respect. My story has nothing to do with him; but I will mention here that he became in after-life a clergyman, and had a living in his brother's gift, in Devonshire.

"I never could bear Henry—that is, Mr. Stourton, from the moment I saw him. When we next met a year later, I did not think him improved, though I suppose he thought differently of me, as he made me pretty speeches, and would have gone even further had I encouraged him,

whereas he had treated me with sovereign contempt before. His mother said it was the grand tour had effected this change in his son's manners. One cannot live in the house with any one, seeing him at many odd unguarded moments, without having some knowledge of a man's character, *unless one is in love with him.* I observed that Mr. Stourton was cruel, selfish, and, though very proud, most despicably mean about money. I think he had a certain sort of affection for his brother Richard, and the kind of fondness for his little sister which a man has sometimes for a dog. These seemed to be his redeeming points.

"His brother, I may as well say at once, my eyes were not opened to behold as he really was. He seemed to me the type of all that was noble and chivalrous. His manner towards myself, to begin with, contrasted notably with Mr. Stourton's. It was a much less coarse order of flattery. When I sang, I felt insulted by the praise of the one; I rose higher in my own estimation from the praise of the other. There never was anything like his grace, whether on

horseback, or in leading a country dance. It was my misfortune that I had always heard undue value attached to the possession of those gifts of beauty and grace. I was but very young, remember—only sixteen. I fell desperately in love with Richard Stourton.

"But I was thoroughly aware of the difference in our positions, and that it was most unlikely that he would marry me. Even Lady Margaret would have opposed her son's marrying a penniless orphan, rescued from the stage by her generosity. Such are the very natural prejudices of the world. That my father had as good blood in his veins as Sir George Stourton, would have gone for nothing (had I been able to prove it), from the simple fact of his having been a foreigner, in exile, and working for his bread. Among other prejudices, which good sense has driven away long ere this in England, that particular one which existed against all foreigners was conspicuous forty or fifty years ago. Sir George had, perhaps, less than the ordinary share of this insular pride; but he made up for

it by his pride of family. His wife had accustomed him to specimens of all nations, and he tolerated this cosmopolitan society better than most English country gentlemen would have done at that epoch; but as to any nearer alliance between the open-handed *grand seigneur* dispensing hospitality to these poor Frenchmen and Italians—why, in the course of his long life, the bare possibility of such a thing, I suppose, never once crossed Sir George's mind. He and his family were altogether of another clay from these poor half-starved '*parlez-vous*'—these clever jugglers, with voice and violin, specially provided by nature to amuse a passing hour! If good-natured Sir George held sentiments such as these, how much more vehement in the same direction were his eldest son's. I knew that Henry, though he was not disinclined to *flirt* with me, would have scouted the idea of his brother's marrying the poor Italian dependent. The family honour would be sorely wounded thereby. Richard, indeed, was very guarded in his conduct. Before his father and brother, and,

more especially still, before his mother, he was careful never to show me more than ordinary civility. Henry was far more attentive to me in public. It was only when we were alone that Richard threw off all restraint, and used to call me his own little wife, and swore that sooner or later he would marry me, in spite of everything, if I would only remain true to him. I felt the difficulties of his position, and of my own; but I blame myself for my conduct, and believe my after-troubles were due to my cowardice then. It was very wrong of me to have concealed this from my dear benefactress, Lady Margaret. Had I told her all, it would have caused my misery *then*; for I suppose we should have been parted at once; but oh, how much after-misery it would have saved!

"I remember once when we were alone—she and I—that she began to speak of her eldest son, evidently with a view to assure herself that his notice of me had not produced a dangerous effect. 'You must not attach any importance to what young men say to you, Teresa; it is a foolish

way they often have which means nothing. But you are a sensible girl, I know, and not likely to be carried away by vanity.' My heart smote me at those words. Not, of course, that I believed what she said, but I felt—as, indeed, I was—guilty. I longed to, but dared not, tell her all. The golden moment slipped by, and was lost for ever.

"The young men had not been home more than six months, when Sir George had a fall out hunting from which he never recovered. A few weeks later he died, leaving the bulk of his fortune, as is always the case in England, to his eldest son. The others were but poorly provided for; at least, to Richard Stourton the few hundreds a year of which he found himself master, seemed nothing after the extravagant habits in which he had been brought up; and in the Guards, which he had just entered, he was not likely to reduce his expenditure. He complained of this to me with some bitterness. I saw that the prospect of our marrying was as far off as ever.

"Lady Margaret was to live at Stourton Towers

until her eldest son married, and of course I remained with her. We saw very little of him now that he was his own master; indeed, the first year after Sir George's death we were almost entirely alone. Sir Henry reduced the establishment a good deal, and went himself to London, finding the country dull, especially during the first year's mourning. Richard had joined his regiment, in London, too. I heard from him constantly. He assured me that the dissipations of the gay capital never made him forget his little Teresa, and that Madame Storace's singing was not to be compared to mine. So that weary year sped by—the last that I was destined to spend at Stourton Towers. I was seventeen when Richard returned home for a month's leave, and I then supplicated him to let me tell his mother. I should have mentioned that he had made me promise to say nothing to her during his absence; nor would he permit me to do so even now. He had a number of good arguments: she was delicate—he was afraid of agitating her; why should not things go on as they were, seeing that until

he got his company, he should be unable to marry, being in debt as it was? Even then I learnt that Richard was obdurate to all such foolish arguments as tears and prayers, when he had once made up his mind.

"This was the last time Lady Margaret ever saw her son. We despatched messengers to London one night, some three months later, to bid Sir Henry and his brother hasten to their dying mother's bedside, but they arrived too late. My lips were sealed by my promise; and, indeed, I would not have agitated her last moments by telling her that I was affianced to her second son; and so she died, ignorant of all. I wept for her as if she had been my own mother. None could have been kinder to me. I was occupied for awhile in trying to soothe the grief of those dear children until their elder brothers came. It had all been so sudden—a few hours' illness, no more —that I had had no time to think of myself, of my strange position, now that she was gone, whose protecting arm sanctioned my presence in that house. What was I to do? Unless Richard

married me at once, I knew enough of the world to be aware that I ought now to seek a home elsewhere. With sensitive pride, I dreaded Sir Henry's speaking to me of my forlorn condition. I hastened, even before the funeral, to open my heart to Richard. I said I was sure he would feel with me that I ought to leave the house the day of Lady Margaret's funeral. To remain as his brother's guest was to expose myself to painful animadversion. He murmured something about his sister and her old governess. I shook my head. I was in no official position here to justify my remaining, now that my dear old friend was gone. I waited to hear what he would say. At last he asked me whether I would not come to London. He would take a lodging for me there, and would be able to come and see me every day. I looked up astonished, I believe; and then the blood rushed into my face; but more at the idea of having doubted him for a moment than that his offer was otherwise than an honourable and gentlemanlike one. 'If you cannot marry me at once, Richard,' I said, 'I ought to return to my father's

family in Italy. I would not, for the world, urge on you the fulfilment of our engagement a day sooner than you judge wise; but, Richard, your dear mother spoke very solemnly to me before she died. She told me how lightly a young girl's character is breathed away. She made me promise that unless I left her house to be married, I would seek my own friends and country, in the event of her death. I had received an affectionate invitation from an old aunt of my mother's, who had only lately heard where I was living, to come over to her, if I was so minded. I showed Lady Margaret the letter. That was not a fortnight ago, Richard, and the letter is not yet answered. *How* shall I answer it?' My eyes were filled with tears—passionate, burning tears. He caught me in his arms, and swore that I should never go back to Italy except with him.

"Oh, Edgar, my boy, how I loved that man! Had not his mother's solemn dying words been ringing in my ears, I might have listened to him, I might have consented to go to London, I might

eventually have fallen. Better women than I have done so. But I resisted all his pleadings, though it was pain and grief to me. I told him I could not go back from my promise to his mother. Either I must leave that house for my *husband's*, or accept my great-aunt's invitation to Lucca (you know the house, Edgar, for we lived there nine years), where I would wait for him, as patiently as I could, until it pleased him to come for me.

"But Richard Stourton was one of those spoilt children of fortune whom opposition only inflames, and who, having actually *no* principle to guide and restrain them, set themselves madly to obtain, by fair means or foul, the object they have in view. My resolution seemed to irritate him beyond measure. I believe, in my heart, that, at that time, Richard Stourton loved me as much as it was in his nature to love anything. What that measure was I leave you to judge, when you learn his conduct.

"He came to me some hours later, and appeared greatly agitated. He said he had had an interview with his brother, and had sounded Sir Henry as to

paying his (Richard's) debts, so as to enable him to marry me. Sir Henry, he said, was furious. Violent words had passed between them. Sir Henry had said he would never receive Richard again if he married me. My blood boiled when I heard this, though it was, indeed, no more than I felt sure of before. Richard then suddenly asked me whether I would marry him privately. He declared that if I would do so, and consent to the marriage remaining concealed for a time, he was resolved to marry me, in spite of his brother, here at Stourton Towers. As soon as he was free from his creditors, he would acknowledge his marriage. Do you suppose I hesitated for an instant? To one faithful and attached creature—a girl named Martha Clutton, who had been Lady Margaret's second maid, and had attended principally on me —I told all. She was to be the sole witness to the ceremony.

"The funeral was three days later. I kept my room until after it was over, and sent a message to Sir Henry, saying that I proposed removing to London, on my way to Italy, in the course of the

following week. Immediately after the funeral, Richard left me for two days, to make, as he said, the necessary preparations. *What* those preparations were I now know. Sir Henry left at the same time, so that there could be no impropriety in my remaining with little Diana for a day or two.

CHAPTER XVI.

BROKEN VOWS.

"It was on the 30th October, 1811, late in the afternoon — I had been expecting and waiting anxiously all day—that Martha Clutton brought me a note given her by Richard's groom. It was to tell me to be at a certain temple in the park, called 'Lady Margaret's Folly,' as soon as it was dusk, accompanied by Martha. 'In the course of time,' said the note, ambiguously, 'you will return to the house, and take your place (which is secured) in the early mail to London, to-morrow morning. I shall be outside; but you will take no notice of me under my disguise, for it is important to prevent any suspicion of my being down here.' According to these instructions, I at once gave out that my journey was fixed for the

following morning. Poor little Diana shed bitter tears. She has probably forgotten my existence long since; but the dear child *then* thought she never could; and I held out to her hopes which, alas! proved quite false, of soon seeing her again. At half-past six o'clock on that evening of the 30th October, Richard Stourton and I were married, as I then firmly believed, in the sight of God, if not in that of man. I paid little attention, as you may believe, to the officiating clergyman. He was in no way different from those I was accustomed to see. Martha afterwards told me that he was quite a stranger in these parts, which I accounted for by saying that of course Mr. Richard had brought some friend with him, as he was not likely to intrust a secret of this kind to the discretion of a gossiping country parson. As to Richard, he seemed to have no thought of anything but me. When we had all signed our names, he pressed me in his arms, and bade me never fear, for that now I was his, and sooner or later the world should know that I was his wife. I cried a little, but they were tears of joy—not

tears of shame and grief; no, those were to come later!

"As the mail coach passed the park-gate at six o'clock the next morning, I bade Diana and her governess good-by the previous night. Martha sat up with me. She was my only companion, and to her I would talk unreservedly. She knew the difficulties of my position: she knew Richard's character, also, I dare say, better than I did. She was shrewd, but even *she* was deceived now; for she thought me safe at the moment of greatest danger. We parted in the grey dawn at the lodge gate, as the guard wound his horn, and the mail drew up for me. One solitary figure sat on the top, wrapped in a military cloak. Martha and I pressed each other's hands silently as we saw it; and then I threw my arms round the faithful woman's neck, and we parted, never to meet again on this side the grave.

"Richard took me to a lodging in an obscure part of London, where we remained a day or two. He then told me he had obtained several months leave of absence, and should take me to Italy at once.

We sailed from the Tower Stairs. How glad I was to leave the city and its smoke behind me! I hated the mystery in which I was kept there. I thought exultingly that when I next saw it I should be acknowledged as Richard's wife by all the world, and proud and perfectly happy. I have never seen England since.

"For four or five months I was very happy. I had absolutely no society but my husband's, and as long as my charm lasted for him he was passionately fond of me. Perhaps had I been more capricious, wayward, exacting—had I not loved him so much, in short—he might not have grown tired of me so soon. But he was accustomed to a great deal of society, and without its excitement he very soon wearied of even such places as Rome and Naples. There were English, of course, in each, even in those days, and acquaintances of his among the number; but whenever I was with him he avoided them in a marked manner, and indeed for some time he shunned them altogether. After a few months, however, he began to spend an evening occasionally with some friend he met by

chance; but he never brought him home, or introduced him to me. I supposed that this absolute seclusion was necessary. He told me it was, and as long as he was with me I cared little about it. When I perceived that he began to crave for more variety himself, I then wished that he would admit some of his friends, or take me into their society. But his dread of his brother's learning that he was married until his debts were paid, was my husband's invariable excuse. The expiration of his leave drew near. I learnt with dismay that I was to be left behind for awhile, and that he would return for me when he was able. He made my approaching confinement one of the excuses for not letting me travel; but I felt keenly that whenever it took place, *he* ought to be with me. I stipulated then to be allowed to go to my aunt's, to which he consented, with the proviso that my name should remain a secret from her, as from all the world. I tried to think I was mistaken; that he was *not* changed towards me, only anxious and worried as to how he should meet his creditors in England, and above all his brother. But I could not help

feeling that seven months ago he would not have talked so calmly of our separation for half that length of time.

"He left me at the end of May. I was to be confined in July. My aunt received me very kindly, and I was as happy in her house as I could be anywhere in the absence of my husband. Husband! Good God! The blow was even now at hand that was to deprive me for ever of the right to call him so. The letters I had from him were written evidently with a mind ill at ease. They were short; they spoke principally of his difficulties; and one of them announced, with some bitterness, that his brother had been married some time. His hopes, which rested entirely on Sir Henry, seemed almost crushed. He had had a violent quarrel with the latter; he did not mention the cause, but I thought then, and I think now, that the cause was myself. I believe even at that time Richard Stourton would have righted me, but for his brother. The next thing I heard was that he was in the debtors' prison. My Richard — the handsome young

guardsman who was *fêted* wherever he went—in prison! it seemed too dreadful to be true. Sir Henry had permitted this extremity of the law to be exercised on his brother, in order to *bring him to reason;* so the baronet informed me in a letter some time later. But, in the meantime, your father, Edgar, had been born; sent me by God, I may truly say, as a solace in all my troubles. My baby was nearly a month old, I think, when I heard of my husband's imprisonment. I was for setting out to him at once. I assured him I was now strong enough to travel, and the sight of his boy would, I was sure, gratify him, and that I was only anxious to share his prison with him, so long as he remained in it. By return-post I had a letter from my husband, desiring me peremptorily, almost harshly, not to think of coming to England at present, under pain of his heavy displeasure.

"Thus the autumn wore away. My husband's letters became shorter, and, alas! fewer too. When Christmas-day came, I found, with a heavy heart, that it was upwards of a fortnight since I

had last heard. I wrote reproachfully, angrily, for the first time; it produced small effect. He answered, as usual, that he was overwhelmed with business, and had had some interviews with his brother. I had a presentiment that these boded me no good. As spring came on, the mention of his brother became more frequent; and from stray passages in the letters, as well as from what I subsequently learnt, I am inclined to attribute this renewal of intimacy between the brothers to the disastrous state of Sir Henry's domestic affairs. Though married scarcely a year, he and his wife were virtually separated. No children had been born to him, and *Richard was his brother's next heir*. Whether this surmise be correct or not, matters little. In April, 1813, just eleven months after Richard Stourton had left me, the blow fell. It came in the shape of a letter from Sir Henry. Richard had not the courage to write himself, and no wonder! Sir Henry wrote of my *connection* with his brother as being one which he considered prejudicial to his interests. Of course I was aware, he added, that the ceremony which Richard had

affected to have performed was a mere farce; the service read through by a layman, to calm my scruples, no more. Under these circumstances, as I doubtless had Richard's interests at heart, Sir Henry wrote (he said) to propose settling an annuity upon me and my child, provided I would sign certain papers, resigning any fancied claims I might suppose I possessed over his brother. He had the unparalleled cold-blooded audacity to add that this would prevent any misunderstanding in the event of his brother's wishing to marry. He pointed out that my declining to accede to this very natural and just demand would do me no good, as I had not a shadow of evidence to prove marriage, while it would deprive me and my child of the means of subsistence. Richard, under any circumstances, had nothing to give. Sir Henry had agreed to compromise with his brother's creditors (among whom, the writer delicately pointed out, was a celebrated *dancer* of the day, to whom his brother had lost large sums at *faro*), on the sole condition that Richard would consent to break off his 'connection' with me. This had

cost him a long and painful struggle, the letter said; but he had finally been brought to the conviction that it was better for all parties that we should meet no more! When I reached this hideous mockery I believe I tore the letter into shreds. I know I neither wept, nor raved, nor fainted. My indignation at what seemed to me at first to be the most transparent of deceptions enabled me to support the first shock of that cruel letter. It was only when I began to ask myself what Sir Henry could hope to gain by inventing such a barefaced lie, *if his brother was inclined to dispute it*, that a sick horror as to the possibility of its truth seized me. The agony of those days that followed—days of waiting in dread anxiety for the next letter—was enough to drive many a woman mad. I had no one to pour out my heart to, no one to consult. I could not begin to show my doubt in Richard Stourton at this moment, by telling my story to my aunt. I sat with clasped hands and closed lips, waiting, waiting, day after day, and praying to God for my child. I had written, in my indignation, immediately on

the receipt of Sir Henry's letter, utterly refusing to believe his story. Nothing but the assurance from my husband himself that he had been guilty of so foul an act of treachery could ever persuade me of it. I was his wife in the sight of God—nothing could change that.

"And at length the answer came. The answer I had hoped for, the answer I had dreaded all these days. It was from Richard himself, supplicating my forgiveness; assuring me that he had meant all along to marry me; that he had been hurried on by passion to commit that act of deception which he should regret all his life; that nothing but his brother's driving him to this step would induce him now to confess the truth; that his finances were in such a state, that he was absolutely and entirely in his brother's hands; and that as Sir Henry now undertook to provide for me and the child on the sole condition of his disavowing the marriage, he *thought it best to do so.*

Thought it best to do so! Thought it best to blast my young life of nineteen years, to bow me down with shame and horror, to bastardize my

child, to desert me, whom he had sworn to succour and protect till death should us part! I was struck to the very earth. I had never believed in the possibility of such treachery, of such mean and cowardly subterfuges for the basest act of which a man could be guilty. May God forgive Richard Stourton, as I have forgiven him! Forty-three years ago I could not breathe that prayer.

"I was stunned by the weight of my affliction. It was only by calling pride and just resentment to my aid that I roused myself after many days were passed. And then I wrote to him—scathing words, words which, if he had anything like the heart of a man in him, must have burnt through its outer coating of selfishness and expediency. It is idle to repeat what I wrote, except this much, that I held myself to be his wife, in God's sight, having pronounced those solemn vows myself in all truth, whatever *he* might have done. That nothing could change or do away with such vows, I believed; but that as to ever troubling him again, he might rest assured I should never do so. Henceforward, as long as I should live, I

was dead to him. Nothing should induce me ever to touch a penny of his or his brother's, until they acknowledged my child's legitimacy. If it pleased God that my boy should live, he might, when he came to man's estate, act as he thought fit in making himself known to his father; but, until that time, Richard Stourton should never hear his name or mine, if I could help it. Under an assumed name I would support the child by my own exertions; and the House of Stourton need never be afraid of my applying to it for assistance under any circumstances whatever. Somewhat to this effect I wrote; and in due course of time another letter came from Richard Stourton, endeavouring to palliate his conduct, and to induce me to accept the annuity Sir Henry offered. He even hinted vaguely at the prospect of being able, perhaps, some day, to redeem the past. I read and re-read this paragraph, but my better judgment pointed to it only as the sop which a miserable selfish nature threw out, by way of stilling the cry of my reproach, and the still small voice of a conscience not yet com-

pletely dead for ever. I returned no answer to this letter. Nor did I reply to a communication from Sir Henry's man of business, advising me of the preliminaries for the settlement of a certain annuity upon me and my child. The only effect it produced was to make me carry out at once the plan I had already conceived. I told my aunt so much of my story as I thought requisite; and then bidding her good-by, I set off at once for Florence. The impresario of the "Pergola" there was an old friend of my father's. I presented myself to him as a widow, under the name of Lillo, and asked him to get an engagement, if he could, for the daughter of his old friend. I studied with him for a few weeks; and, in the commencement of the autumn, not six months after Richard Stourton's desertion of me, when the "Pergola" opened for the season, I made my first appearance before the public.

"I have to thank God, for many blessings, Edgar, in the midst of all my troubles; but for none more than the gifts of indomitable energy and pride, which prevented my sinking then, and

made me battle on with the determination of carving out a future for myself and child, since those on whom we leaned had discarded us. You know, by hearsay, my dear boy, that I was successful; that for fifteen or sixteen years I sang alternately at the chief theatres in Italy (no bribe of salary ever induced me to leave it); and, being a favourite, made a considerable income. I was enabled to give your father the very best education of a gentleman; and when he grew up, and I retired from the stage, and he married, I still continued to give singing-lessons for some years; for your father was always delicate—never strong enough to make his own way in a profession; and the chances of a large family (you and your sister were already born) made it necessary for me to provide against the future. Thus, I may say, my dear Edgar, that I redeemed the promise I made in those early days of my desertion, to be beholden to no one for our support. When your father came of age, you may be sure I told him all. I then put it to him, whether he would make himself known to Sir Richard Stourton, (as he had lately become,)

by the death of his brother, without children. I had taken care to inform myself as to his career during all these years. It had been one of reckless dissipation. He was a favourite at court, and much sought after in society, by reason of his expectations; but he had never married. I need not say that had he felt the slightest desire to discover me it would not have been difficult to have done so, under my assumed name. But he had accepted my words literally enough. I *was*, indeed, completely dead, as far as he was concerned. All this your father, who had the wisdom of a much older man, felt, and decided that only pain and humiliation could accrue from his making himself known to Sir Richard. I hope his consideration for my feelings did not influence him too much in this decision; at all events, it was definitive. The subject was never named again; but when it pleased God to take him from us, dear Edgar, I told him then that I should think it right to make you acquainted with these facts before I died. The motives which may have prompted your father's decision can

exist no longer when I am gone. If you think it well for your worldly interests, and those of my darling Nina, to go to Sir Richard Stourton, and tell him that you are his grandchildren, I see no reason why you should not do so. But let me implore you, if you decide on such a course, to act with moderation, with temper, and discretion. Life is too short, my boy, and eternity too near at hand for us to go on prosecuting our petty revenges for human injury and injustice, in the presence of that Giver of all Good, whom we all so grievously offend.

"And so, as you bear this in mind, my beloved Edgar, may God bless and prosper you!

"T. C."

CHAPTER XVII.

EXPLANATIONS.

HERE the manuscript ended. An extra sheet or two had been appended, consisting of memoranda. Among them that having reference to Mrs. Pendarves, which Edgar had shown her.

The tears were in Lady Trevelyan's eyes as she laid it down.

"Noble, brave woman!" she exclaimed, "I can well understand your veneration for her. What a cruel fate!"

"No momentary act, however splendid, can compare with that life-long heroism, can it?"

"I think not."

"I know what is passing in your mind, Lady Trevelyan: that I have not sought to emulate it; that I have not acted up to the spirit of those

solemn closing words? Before you quite condemn me, listen to what I have to say."

"I am listening," said Lady Trevelyan, in a low voice.

"You know human nature too well," he began, "to suppose that a man of my temperament could take that disclosure tamely. The more patient and brave had been my grandmother's conduct under her cruel trials, the more fiercely and vindictively did I feel towards the cause of all her misery. No thought of turning to advantage the accident of my birth entered my mind; but a very distinct desire to make him suffer at the bar of public opinion, for the cowardly wrong he had inflicted, decided me on coming to England with my sister. When I went as a student to Bonn, nearly four years ago, it was thought advisable that I should drop my grandmother's and father's assumed name of 'Lillo,' and adopt an English one, as being more likely to obtain for me a tutorship, which was then the object of my ambition. The choice of a name was fixed by the accident of my having acted the character of Faulconbridge in

'King John,' with some success, among a party of friends at Lucca. I have kept it ever since; and when my sister resolved to try her fortunes on the stage, it was decided that she also should change her name. I landed in England without any distinct plan of action, only I was resolved to see Sir Richard Stourton, to learn from my own observation whether age and remorse had wrought any good influence in his character, before I did anything. I happened to remember having heard Ferrers, three years ago, mention the name of Stourton, casually, as belonging to old friends of his family. I bethought me, soon after I arrived, of writing to him; and you know how it came about that I effected the object of my desire —an introduction into this house."

"But why the deception about your being married? How came that idea to enter your head? Permit me to say that I think your grandmother, judging by this document, would have been strongly opposed to any such proceeding. I regret it more than I can say."

"Listen," continued Edgar, with very earnest

eyes fixed on her face. "Hear me out, before you altogether condemn. . . . I don't expect you to approve of all I did; but at least you will give me the credit of foregoing my own cherished scheme of retribution, for the sake of my sister's welfare. . . . Ferrers, in his letter, most distinctly said, that none but a *married* actress, whose respectability could be vouched for, would be allowed by Sir Richard to take the requisite part in the theatricals. He explained this by saying that Sir Richard had the greatest dread of his nephew's marrying, except as his uncle should direct. Thus, the idea first suggested itself to me of passing off Nina as my wife. I will not say that the thought of the bare possibility of her captivating the heir of Stourton did not cross my mind; but I swear to you, Lady Trevelyan, that it was with no such plot that I entered these doors. When I first saw how his admiration was excited, I smiled to myself to think what a marvellous instance of poetical justice it would be, did circumstances ever admit of their marrying. But it was not until we had

been here some days that the idea assumed the form of a serious possibility. I had then to make up my mind between two courses of action. I felt no inclination to spare Sir Richard from any personal attraction. Should I make myself known to him, and publicly denounce the conduct (still amenable to the penalties of the law) which had bastardized my father? Or should I allow this nascent attachment between his nephew and my sister to grow up, and flourish? The two, of course, were inconsistent. A measure of open hostility, like the first, must for ever separate my sister from George Stourton. It was on the day of his accident—the day that you found me in Sir Richard's room—that I pondered these questions in my mind. Nina's distress upon her return, poor child—distress which revealed to me how deeply her feelings were already implicated, unknown to herself, almost decided me; and when, during George's confinement to the sofa, I had the opportunity of seeing what a fine, upright fellow he really was, I definitely made up my mind to tell him everything, and let him

act as he chose. I will not say that another cause did not influence my decision. Perhaps it did. But when, at length, on Saturday, after every one was in bed, I sat up with George, and revealed to him my real name and Nina's, I had resolved to abandon all proceedings against Sir Richard."

"Knowing, no doubt," said Lady Trevelyan, with a slight inflection of sarcasm in her voice, "that hardly any punishment could be more severe to my uncle than the destruction of all his favourite schemes for George's marriage. However, what you tell me *does* make a difference—I am bound to admit it, though I regret extremely—as much as ever—that you should have put it in the world's power to say that you obtained an entrance into this house by deception, and that George was ensnared by you into a clandestine marriage."

"Do you think any one who knows the truth will dare to say that? Do you think Sir Richard himself, with the memory of that hideous deception—of that *false* clandestine marriage—forced back

upon his mind, will dare to use such language as this? He affects not to believe that I am the grandson of Teresa Conti; but I read in his eyes the conviction, beyond words, of the truth of my story. With the knowledge of my wrongs, and of my sister's,—with the knowledge that I am a penniless outcast, instead of revelling in the lap of luxury in George's place, as the heir to this old title and large fortune,—with the knowledge of this, I say, do you think Sir Richard will have the courage to talk of my 'deception?' I hardly think so."

He spoke with strong excitement, and waited for her next words with a look of keen anxiety.

"I said you had put it in the *world's* power. The house is full of people—various accounts of this strange story will of course be transmitted all over England by this day's post. You cannot expect that it will all be taken as a matter of course, without comment and conjecture. I am sorry, for the interest I bear you, that this should be the case. I grant that you had great provocation—and some excuse for acting as you did. But

what we are least tolerant of in England is anything like underhand dealing among gentlemen. Society, ignorant of your motives, will only know that you have entered this house under an assumed name, and in a false position. This will be prejudicial to you—and very justly so."

"I forgot the importance you attach to the voice of society," said Edgar, with some irritation.

"Not unduly, I think," she replied, calmly. "There is no doubt that in matters of worldly advancement the voice of society is potent. I attach just so much importance to it, and no more. It does not influence my decisions, or alter my opinions of a friend's actions; but I cannot help seeing every day that it *is* of a certain value. We are jealous, you know, for the reputation of those in whom we take an interest."

"Do you *really* take an interest in me? Is that more than a polite form of words?" he asked, quickly. "I declare to you I am indifferent about the opinion of all the rest of the world, but not about *yours*. I spoke just now of another cause which had induced me to relinquish my scheme of

retribution against Sir Richard. Why should I not confess that this cause was my deference to your feelings? I knew how any such step would shock and distress you."

"Why did you not place confidence in me, then, and tell me everything?"

"Because I was instinctively sure that your sensitive conscience would recoil from concealment and deception, however much *I* might hold myself justified in employing both. It was impossible you should put yourself in my place."

"Was your sister aware of all this?" asked Lady Trevelyan, glad of the opportunity to turn the conversation out of its directly personal course. "Did she know who Sir Richard was?"

"No. She had an impression that, from some cause connected with our grandmother, I bore him no love. She could not help gathering so much; but I told her nothing. Why was I to trouble her young life with the knowledge of that story of treachery and wrong? When I had decided that we would come here, I made her understand that there were reasons which rendered it neces-

sary that she should pass as my wife for a time. After the first astonishment, she submitted, as she has always done, to my authority without hesitation; and though once or twice, after we came here, and she became conscious of George's admiration, she expostulated with me upon the false position in which she was placed, I pacified her by the assurance that this state of things would only last for a few days."

"But when did you tell her? For you *did*, I suppose, tell her everything at last?"

"On Sunday morning, in consequence of what had passed between George and me the previous night, I told her the true state of things, and also of the intention he had expressed of asking her to be his wife. He added that it might be some time before he should be able to bring his uncle round to the idea, but that he should ultimately obtain Sir Richard's consent he did not doubt, as he was resolved to marry no one else. I repeated all he had said to Nina verbatim, and also my own reply—that I could not permit her to enter into a long and indefinite engagement. A

limit must be fixed, before which time they must marry, or the thing be broken off. I saw Nina grow pale when I said that. She told me she would wait any number of years, but that she felt she should never love any one but George Stourton, and that when she engaged herself she should consider the engagement binding for life. I confess I was surprised at so much decision and strength of character in my gentle, docile sister. It made me additionally anxious that her happiness should not be wrecked, as too many women's are, by a long, hopeless engagement. That very morning, as you know, came the order for George's departure. It was followed by the interview with Sir Richard. That, by exasperating George, gave the impetus (which, perhaps, might otherwise have been wanting) necessary to a prompt and decisive measure. He spoke to her that afternoon — obtained her consent and mine to a private marriage, which should enable him to take his wife out with him to India next week, and went up to town for the special licence next day."

"Then they were married—I see it all now—actually in the chapel the night before last?"

"Yes. Mrs. Pendarves' room is close at hand, and I made sure that, for our grandmother's sake, she would not refuse to be present at the ceremony. But George spent half-an-hour fruitlessly with her, and so did I. Some old-fashioned idea of the duty she owed to her master (though her respect, knowing what she does, must be small) was stronger than anything else. As long as she ate Sir Richard's bread, she would not act 'against him,' as she called it. My sister had fortunately the evening before secured the presence of Miss Skipton. George and Barnet must have been waiting in the chapel two hours, I should think, before I and my sister——"

"It was *you*, then, who were with your sister?"

"Yes; and I suppose yours was the door we heard creak in the passage."

"But about Miss Skipton—did she fall into your plans at once?"

"My sister and she had become sworn friends, as you saw. That morning, by my advice, Nina

broke the fact to Miss Skipton, that she was my sister, not my wife, and that she was engaged to George Stourton. I thought in case of any difficulty, it was well to be prepared; and the event proved I was right. Our old witness failed us, but Nina had her friend, and in half-an-hour she joined us in the chapel. It was a strange sight that marriage—by the light of a single lamp, with the moon shining fitfully through the pointed windows."

"And when it was over?"

"We all stole back to our rooms. George would fain have carried his wife off that night, but consideration for the general confusion his absence at the theatricals would cause, prevented that. It was arranged therefore that they should remain here quietly until the plays were over, and leave by the early mail-train this morning.

"And are they gone to London?"

"Yes: he has taken a lodging for the few days they have before sailing. I join them there to-night."

"I suppose we shall see no more of him? How strange it seems—George married! It is like a dream."

"Your seeing him—at least his coming here—depends on Sir Richard. If your uncle consents to receive George's wife, George will bring her down here before they start."

Lady Trevelyan shook her head.

"He will not do that. He may come round in time, but it will take long first. George has deeply offended his uncle, and he will not so easily forgive him."

"Have you seen Sir Richard?"

"No—I tried twice. The first time you were with him; the second, Mrs. Pendarves. I have desired them to let me know as soon as he is willing to see me, though I dread it. My uncle (as you know too well) had always violent passions, which a long course of self-indulgence, poor old man, has inflamed almost beyond his control at times. I really dread the effect of exasperation upon him, combined with this discovery about you. The old wound, which he thought closed

over for ever, bursting out bleeding after forty-five years—it is a terrible punishment, a terrible blow, shattering to body and mind at his age. I shudder to think of it."

"Your pity, I think, is somewhat misplaced," said Edgar, sternly. "You forget the punishment he *escapes*. You forget, also, the life-long punishment he inflicted on the innocent. He was a bad man in his youth, and he has done nothing to redeem the past in his old age. I *have* spared him. I see no reason why I should pity him. On the contrary, I hope he may suffer from all the sharp agonies of remorse—which, I take it, is the worst kind of torture."

"Shall we only pity those who are good? Surely those who have sinned are much more to be pitied? Think of your grandmother's calm and peaceful end; and then turn to the passion-troubled close of this old man's life. Which is most to be pitied, think you?"

He felt her luminous eyes resting upon him, though his own were dropped. And the angry spirit within shrank back quelled, as it had so

often done before, at the soothing touch of an angel-hand.

"Sir Richard's wicked act," she continued, in her low, clear voice, "was committed as a very young man. I do not attempt to palliate it; but consider what the code of morals of that day was. The young men of fashion had a very high example of profligacy; and for that high example every excuse was made. I believe Sir Richard must often have bitterly repented of his conduct—though, perhaps, he has never shown it. It is not in his character to do so. His passion and his pride may combine to keep any such feeling out of sight now, but that it exists I doubt not. Will you not say you pity him?" she added, holding out her hand.

He took it, and pressed it to his lips.

"I will try and do so—for your sake."

There was the sound of some one running down the passage; a sharp, hurried knock at the door; and, the next instant, Millet's face, pale and terror-stricken, appeared in the doorway.

"If you please, my lady—Sir Richard——"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CATASTROPHE.

LADY TREVELYAN started up.

"Sir Richard has a fit—or something, my lady."

She waited to hear no more, but ran out of the room, followed by Edgar. In the passage, he turned round, and said to Millet,—

"Was he alone when it happened?"

"Yes, sir. One of the servants was passing the door of Sir Richard's room, and heard a heavy fall and a groan. He ran and told me, and I went in, and we lifted him up; but, sir,—I'm afraid——"

"Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Yes, sir, instantly: but he can't be here for half an hour—and—I don't think anything is to

be done. I thought it best to prepare her ladyship; but the truth is, sir, that I think he's *gone*."

When Edgar entered the room it was already crowded with servants, and Mrs. Pendarves, in an authoritative voice, was ordering them all out. They had placed Sir Richard in his morocco chair. Lady Trevelyan was bending over him. Mrs. Pendarves was endeavouring, by the application of some strong stimulant, to restore animation. They had torn open the shirt and heavy folds of neckcloth, and the swollen, purple face hung forward, unpropped, upon his chest. Edgar went to the window, and threw it wide; then, pushing back the crowd of frightened, hysterical women round the chair where Sir Richard lay,—

"The only chance of saving him is to lift him upright, and to give him air," he said. He put his strong young arms round the old man's body, and, with an effort, managed to raise him into such a position that the lungs could become more easily inflated, if breath yet remained in the body.

For an instant there seemed hope. A sigh,

scarcely perceptible, stirred the lips and shivered through the frame. There was a convulsive movement of one of the hands, which clutched tight a roll of papers. The next moment, the black shade gathered deeper over the face, and it fell backwards.

"It's all over, sir," said Mrs. Pendarves. "Good Lord! who'd ha' thought it!"

The confusion which reigned in the house can be imagined. The servants had not recovered their equilibrium from the excitement of George's elopement, when the shock of this catastrophe to the head of the house came to throw them completely off their balance. The guests were all departing—trunks, ready to be carried down, in the corridors—flys from the station waiting to convey them and their owners away; but there in groups of twos and threes, the panic-stricken servants stood about, doing nothing but talking in doorways, with bated breath. The doctor had pronounced that the case was not an unusual one, but it was necessary that there should be a coroner's inquest.

A telegram was sent for George. Miss Skipton offered to remain with Lady Trevelyan, but she declined. She saw no one: but sent a message to Bradley Ferrers, to say that if he could make it convenient to stay on for a few days, she should feel much obliged to him, as she thought he might be of use to George in the arrangement of affairs.

Bradley would have thrown up twenty briefs to do her the smallest pleasure. To do a real service, he would have thrown them up for any one.

As to Edgar, it is hardly necessary to say that he at once, and without even speaking to Lady Trevelyan, decided on remaining.

The position of those two men in the house of mourning—which had only yesterday been a house of mirth and festivity—those two *quondam* friends alone in the house (so to speak, for Lady Trevelyan kept her room, and, one by one, all the guests were gone) — those two men forced into each other's company sorely against their inclination,— this position was not enviable. They knew they

were rivals. But more than this. While Edgar had a sort of magnificent contempt for the hopeless passion of the plain, unattractive lawyer, he had, nevertheless, a consciousness that there were qualities in Bradley Ferrers which Lady Trevelyan prized very highly, and in which he, Edgar, was certainly deficient. He knew that she would consult Bradley upon any difficult point; that she had the greatest confidence in his judgment, his temper, his self-restraint. Would she trust to those qualities in Edgar, if she had occasion to do so?

Bradley, for his part, since the events of last night, knew not what to make of Edgar's conduct. He now heard—as did all the rest of the house—that the lady who had passed for his wife was his sister. Putting the most lenient construction on his conduct, then (and perhaps Bradley was not quite as disposed to be lenient as usual), Edgar had been guilty of a most unworthy ruse, for the purpose of effecting an entrance into Stourton Towers for himself and his sister. But with a recollection of the very explicit letter which he,

Bradley, had written, it was hardly uncharitable to surmise that what had come to pass was the result of a deliberate plot, in which he had been used as a cat's-paw. The idea was not calculated to increase his cordiality towards a man whom he had served—only too well, as it turned out.

In this attitude of repulsion, the two men sat together over that dreary dinner, and drank their claret.

The coroner's inquest sat the next day, at twelve o'clock. Before that hour, George and his wife had returned from London, and the former was present to hear the examination of witnesses relative to his uncle's death. The coroner was a pompous fool. If it was possible to complicate and mystify a case, he did it. Mr. Millet was first examined. Having recovered from the shock of the previous day, he deposed, in choice language, to having knocked at Sir Richard's door at a quarter to twelve—it might be ten minutes—but he was inclined to think it was a quarter. In consequence of information he had just received from James, after knocking and

receiving no answer, he opened the door. He found Sir Richard on the floor. Being told to describe exactly the position in which the baronet lay, he said that the deceased's head was inside the fender, and that one hand was stretched out in the grate, as though his intention had been to put some papers he held into the fire.

"Papers?" said the coroner, in his most judicial tone. "This is the first time we have heard of *papers!* We have been told of Sir Richard's violent excitement, in consequence of events which had taken place the previous night, and of his angry interview with Mr. Faulconbridge; but we have now a new element to deal with—papers. Who shall say that these papers did not contain *poison?* Is the medical gentleman ready to declare that the symptoms he has attributed to apoplexy, cannot have resulted from poison? Gentlemen, this is serious. *Where* are these papers? They were not burnt, therefore they ought to be forthcoming."

But no one knew anything about these papers. The servants, headed by Mrs. Pendarves, were

rigidly cross-examined. They remembered seeing a roll clutched tightly in the hands of the deceased, as he lay in his chair. They could say no more. A message was sent to Lady Trevelyan, as George stated that she had put everything under lock and key, awaiting his return, but she replied that she had not seen the papers in question. Mrs. Pendarves was then recalled, as being the last person who had had personal intercourse with the deceased. She was asked to state what had passed at that interview. She, point-blank, said, No; she wouldn't. The coroner looked all the terrors of the law at her; but Mrs. Pendarves didn't care for that. Had she no reason to believe—upon her solemn word, had she no reason to think that any intention of suicide was in the baronet's mind at that time?

"Suicide-fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Mrs. Pendarves, whose bile was now fairly roused. "Sir Richard had a 'plexy fit. The doctors told you so, ain't that enough?—going on worriting about suicide, as if there weren't trouble enough about

the poor old gentleman's death, as it is! My husband died of a 'plexy, so I know well enough what it's like. It isn't every one as can die quiet in their beds. And it's a shame to them as has the misfortune to be taken sudden, that they should be worrited, and pisoned, and suicided this way. I han't no patience with it."

Then the coroner was quelled. And as it was clear that, by no ingenuity, would he be able to institute a doubt as to the baronet's having made away with himself, he was reluctantly compelled to close the proceedings by recording the commonplace opinion, that "The deceased died in an apoplectic fit."

The inquest over, and the distressing ferment in which every one had been kept having subsided somewhat, George found himself in a position requiring advice. He had telegraphed to Mr. Spring, the family lawyer, desiring his immediate presence. A similar message had been sent to the trustees; but they might not arrive until the following day. And three days later the first division of his regiment was to sail from

Gravesend. What was he to do? The will, under the circumstances, might without impropriety, be opened on the lawyer's arrival; but after all, the will, he was aware, could only partially affect his position. His uncle might have actually carried that last threat into execution, and left all his devisable property away from George; but the Stourton estate he knew must be his as heir-at-law. Ought he, in this altered position of grave responsibility, to throw up his commission?—to give into hands unshackled by other ties the charge he had undertaken in different circumstances? Now that he was not going out alone, he would really regret giving up the idea of seeing India, and shooting tigers, and riding upon an elephant—the glimpses of a new life, in short, which he had promised himself during the next year or two, to say nothing of the chances of some "fun" in the way of fighting, which seemed more probable, every day. But if it were deemed necessary that Sir George Stourton should remain at home to look after his newly inherited property, why, he must do so.

He had a long interview with his cousin Di. She was too wise to reproach him with his clandestine marriage, even had she felt so disposed. But she was getting to think that his marrying Nina was, perhaps, the best thing that George could have done. Nina had passed some hours with her since her arrival, and, as was natural under her altered circumstances, was less timid and reserved with Lady Trevelyan than she had ever yet been. Examining her by the light of all she now knew, Lady Trevelyan was disposed to return to the favourable judgment she had first formed of the young actress. It was not difficult to understand how the false position in which she had been placed had rendered Edgar's sister shy and confused in her manner with other women, especially with the lady of the house, Sir Richard Stourton's niece. It was not difficult to understand that this should increase so soon as Nina was engaged to Sir Richard Stourton's nephew. If she had erred, there were infinite allowances to be made for her. Diana Trevelyan was not a woman to deal a harsh measure of judgment to

any living creature; and she had the rare magnanimity to rescind cheerfully any opinion she had reason to believe was falsely formed. She had spent a night and the best part of a day, since her uncle's death, thinking over these things. She was ready to open her arms in a cordial, sisterly embrace to the young bride on her arrival the next morning.

George, I have said, had a long interview with his cousin Di. He looked worn and worried, for he had never yet found himself in a position of grave responsibility, and was as a child in all business matters. His feelings, too, had been a good deal upset at Sir Richard's awfully sudden death. His uncle's unreasonable violence towards himself had driven him into taking a measure which had certainly been the remote cause of the baronet's death, and though he could not be honestly said to be much attached to his uncle, this circumstance naturally produced a painful effect on so kind and impressionable a nature as George Stourton's.

He entered the library, and found Bradley Ferrers.

"I have been looking for you," he said. "I want to consult you, Ferrers. This has come upon me so suddenly that I scarcely know where to turn—what to do. Following, too, so immediately after my own marriage, and the disclosure of Edgar's position as regarded Sir Richard——"

"Stay, George. I don't know what you refer to. If it is a secret, let me stop you in time. Faulconbridge and I are no longer intimate. As is often the case, I introduced him to my friends, and our intimacy was destroyed at once."

"That mustn't be, Ferrers. It won't be when you come to know all. He is a very queer fellow; and it was not until I had the key to all his eccentricities that I could understand him."

George then told Ferrers the story of Edgar's birth. When he had finished, he said,—

"Now, to-morrow my uncle's will will be opened. He may have left me his money, or he mayn't, but at all events I think it's extremely unlikely that he will have named either of his grandchildren in a codicil. I've every reason to think that until a couple of hours before he died

he didn't know of their existence. I have talked to Mrs. Pendarves. She assures me that he believed Teresa Conti and his son to have died upwards of forty years ago. He told her so at the time; he always afterwards spoke of them as dead to her. Just before his death he sent for her, and he was then in a very excited state. He swore that Edgar was an impostor. He asked her if she didn't think so. She said, on the contrary, she was convinced of the truth of the story. He then became still more violent, and asked what proofs she could have. She gave him all her reasons, ending by saying that she had seen a letter written by Edgar's grandmother just before she died. Sir Richard was furious. Mrs. Pendarves declares that during the fifty-one years she knew him, she never saw him in such a state before. He vowed it was a plot to frighten him out of his money, and me out of my inheritance (though how he could make that out, I can't see), and he swore that it shouldn't succeed. The old woman very sensibly thought that arguing the matter just then with him was worse

than useless—was only exasperating him—so she left the room; and a few minutes afterwards he seems to have had the fit. Now, from all this, Ferrers, it naturally follows that Sir Richard won't have left Edgar a penny. This I feel to be a most abominably hard case, and Edgar's so deuced proud that I know nothing would induce him to receive anything from me. Now, I want you, like a good fellow, to try and arrange this for me."

"Arrange what, George? If he won't take anything from you, he won't. I can't make him, nor, indeed, blame him."

"It isn't that, Ferrers. But couldn't you insert a codicil (supposing my uncle has left his money to me), giving a certain annuity to his grandson—say, a thousand a year? It's the only way I should ever be able to get him to take it; and, after all, he has much more right to Sir Richard's *private* fortune than I have."

The barrister smiled.

"Your proposal is magnanimous, George, but I'm afraid it won't do. It's as much as our place

is worth to forge, even in the interests of virtue and generosity. If you can persuade Edgar of the existence of such a codicil, well and good. If I am not much mistaken, however, he will be incredulous. And to say the truth, George, I think he is a man likely to be much happier earning an independence for himself than eating the bread of fretful idleness. I hope he won't stick to his idea of going on the stage. The best service you can render him is to dissuade him from that, and try and open to him some higher and wider field for his abilities."

"Perhaps you're right, Ferrers," said George, musing. "As to the stage, I'm so fond of it myself that I can fancy a fellow who is as clever as he is giving up everything for it; but I suppose it don't pay; and if Edgar won't *take* any money, he must *make* it, that's clear. If he marries——"

George stopped short. His eye met Bradley's. He turned away from that haggard face, which had whitened in that one minute.

"I'll tell you what has struck me," continued

George, after a pause. "The first division of my regiment sails, you know, on Tuesday. Of course I can't go with it—it's impossible; but I might go with the second division, ten days later. I don't like shirking just because I've come in to some tin, and have got a handle to my name. I should think in a fortnight's time the lawyers and fellows would let me go, shouldn't you?"

"That depends. You must have some responsible person here—some business man, as your representative—to look after the estate, and so on, I should think."

"Exactly. Well, what I thought of was of making Edgar manage things for me while I'm away. He would live here, and do what he liked; and in the meantime I would ask Lord Granfield, who has interest with the present Ministry, to try and get something for him. I know Louis Granfield thought him a deuced clever fellow when he was here."

"He is not a man of business," said Bradley, dryly. "However, that is of course your own look-out."

The next day the will was opened.

Sir Richard had bequeathed the whole of his property, with the exception of a few legacies and annuities to servants, to his nephew, George Stourton.

once about this scheme of getting Edgar to superintend his affairs; but to Edgar himself he had as yet said nothing. In the meantime he had written to his colonel, and effected the necessary exchange with a brother officer, who would accompany George's troop on the passage out, while George followed ten days later.

Thus Monday and Tuesday passed—busily with George, who found himself beset by applications of all sorts: bailiffs and tenants; bills and letters of condolence and congratulation, requiring answers after their kind; regimental arrangements, funeral arrangements, financial arrangements, domestic arrangements;—he was nearly beside himself with them all. The ladies relieved him of a good deal of the lighter work, while Edgar helped him very efficiently with the graver portion, eliciting the remark from Mr. Spring, that the baronet's brother-in-law had an uncommonly clear head. He had never met with a young man who he supposed had not had much to do with mortgages and leases, railway stock and consols, seizing all the points of an intricate matter like Mr. Faulcon-

bridge. For "Faulconbridge" he continued still to be called. "One name is as good as another to me," he said; "and as I mean to adopt England as my country now, George, let me bear the name by which you first knew me. It isn't worth while changing."

So, during the four remaining days until the funeral, Edgar spent the time principally with George, though there were many odd hours passed alone in Diana Trevelyan's society, when the young husband and wife stole away after luncheon, or in the twilight, and when Mr. Spring was still docketing leases and debentures in the library. Of these interviews, drawing together into closer intimacy two persons between whom a very strong sympathy had existed from the first days of their acquaintance, it is given to us to know nothing but the result.

"George," said Nina, hesitatingly, as she nestled her head on his shoulder, "do you think your cousin would ever think of Edgar?"

"Well, I've been thinking of that already. Is he really in love?—eh, Nina?"

"*Really?* Oh! you don't know him, George. He does nothing by halves. He has been getting worse and worse, I know, almost ever since we came here. And now I don't know what will happen to him if he finds that his case is hopeless. I should so like, George, to feel when we go to India that we are leaving him with some chance of happiness, by-and-by. If not," she added, with a sad voice, "I think it would be so much kinder of her not to see him any more. It may be all nothing to her, but it is a great deal, I know, to him."

"Di is a queer woman, Nina, with all sorts of ideas of her own, which I don't pretend to understand. After being bored to death for ten years with old Trevelyan, I should think Edgar would be a most agreeable change. But she mayn't think so: I can't say. One thing is clear, however: we must get him a good appointment, if we can. He has a first-rate head for all kind of work (I wish to heavens *I* had!), and is sure to get on, if he once puts his foot on the ladder."

Lord Granfield and Louis, Mr. Lichfield and

several of the late baronet's friends in this and the adjoining counties, came to the funeral. George's first idea had been to decline the attendance of any but the tenants, and those immediately connected with the family. But wise cousin Di pointed out that not only would the pomp and circumstance of a great funeral train be consonant to the wishes of their late uncle, but that, under the circumstances of George's clandestine marriage, and his intended departure immediately for India, it was well for him to accept this opportunity of presenting his wife to a large circle of his acquaintance, and of assuming their position at once in the county as Sir George and Lady Stourton.

The funeral, therefore, was one of those mockeries which are, happily, going out of fashion. A procession of nearly a mile in length: thirty carriages, besides mourning-coaches, with the tenants, under-servants, and labourers a-foot; all Stourbridge turning out, to a man, to witness the show: many a merry jest, but not a single tear or a regret. After all, there was a terrible

fitness in that old man's being thus borne to the grave unmourned—yet with every outward sign of ostentatious mourning, who had lived unhonoured —yet with every outward sign of ostentatious honour.

The women watched the procession wind through the park: peeping from upper windows, behind the lowered blinds. Lady Trevelyan and Lady Stourton were together, melancholy, as gentle, compassionate women must be at such times, when they remember that a life ill-spent is vanished beyond recall. Mrs. Pendarves and Jemima, in bombazine, at another window, followed, with vigilant eyes, the movements and gradual extension of the funeral train.

"It's a gratifyin' sight," said Mrs. Pendarves, shaking her head, "and one which, twenty years ago, I scarcely hoped ever to see—a hearse as is fit for a dook, and seven mournin'-coaches. I thought he'd ha' been carried to his grave, quite promiscuous-like, when he were a younger man; but things change—Lord ha' mercy on us! how things *do* change! Not an old family for thirty

mile round as isn't here—leastways, a carriage. There's no denyin' it's gratifyin', Jemima. If Sir Richard was alive, it's just what 'd please him. There's Lord Granfield gettin' into his carriage, and the Markis of Castlegray; and Lord Carrlyon and Mrs. Lichfield in the next; and where's Mr. Faulconbridge?—hum—he went in the carriage with Sir George, I suppose. I don't see him."

"He's not gone, aunt, I think. I saw him sitting in the library, as I passed, with his head in his hands. Quite like Hamlet. I longed—but I didn't dare—to ask if I could 'minister to a mind diseased?'"

"He hasn't no disease, Jemima; don't talk rubbish. He's as healthy a young man as I know. Now I come to think on it, he hasn't no call to go to the funeral—and he does quite right to stay away. There's Mrs. Broughton's carriage, I see, and the Floods'. Lor' bless me! if those people haven't set up a *noo* carriage for the occasion, I do believe. I must say it shows a very proper feeling of respect for the family—

remembering what they was; only they needn't stick their rubbishy arms on the carriage. Lor' bless me! what a vale of tears this is, to be sure! Here to-day, and gone to-morrow, as one may say! Those mutes are pretty nigh smothered in their scarves, Jemima. I shouldn't mind a dress out of 'em. It's beautiful soft silk. I made a cardinal out of 'em when your uncle Pendarves was buried, and I could hardly wear it out, the silk was that good. Well, I'm glad I didn't go, Jemima: there's a mighty sharp wind—look how the feathers and the cloaks is blown about!—and I'm not so young as I was. Fifty-two year come Michaelmas, I've been in the family, Jemima. I hope you'll be able to say as much, my dear. It's a comfort to think I saw the last of him, rememberin' him a lad of nineteen; and bygones *is* bygones, when folks is in their graves. Mr. Roundel will tell us all about it this evenin'; for I told him, most particular, to come up and have a cup o' tea. As to Mr. Millet, he's never no use to give an account, for he's always after his language. I hate language, I do! If Sir George

goes to Injey, the establishment 'll be redooced, I suppose—and, for the dignity of the family, I'm sorry, Jemima; but as to Mr. Millet, I shan't shed no tears after *him*."

Thus, in a complacent mood, which opened the sluices of her garrulity, the old housekeeper stood at the window, until the last figure in the funeral train had wound out of sight. Jemima held a pocket handkerchief under her nose—perhaps to decoy a tear in that direction: but about her aunt, at least, there was no false sentiment. She did not regret Sir Richard, nor did she affect to do so. They were both old: she had known him for fifty-two years; and this life is a fleeting one. That, as we have seen, was the amount of serious reflection which the spectacle superinduced.

Meanwhile, in the darkened library, where the very sound of the wood crackling on the fire came deadened over the heavy carpets, and the light struggled faintly through the closely-drawn blinds, the grandson of the man who was even now being borne to his grave sat alone—taking no part in

the ostentatious procession of mourning without. But three short weeks had elapsed since he first entered that house. How had his prayers been answered—his fondest hopes fulfilled—nay, as we shall presently see, his wildest dreams more than realized! That old man, towards whom he had felt the bitterest resentment for the deep wrong inflicted on those whom Edgar had loved best on earth, and who were now beyond the reach of redress—that old man had been punished, in the destruction of his ambitious schemes, before he had been struck down. His sister was safe from toil and privation, by having married a man she loved: and more than this, by a marriage which had restored to a truer balance the uneven scales of justice. As to himself, how different the whole future might be—*must* be, in one sense—from this time forwards! His worldly position might be raised, beyond what had ever seemed possible three weeks back. But far more than this—the whole heart of the man had undergone a deep and mysterious change: a change such as the hard wintry earth experiences with the first

softening influences of spring, which stirs the juices in the roots, and wakens into life what might else have remained frost-bound for ever.

And yet might the preacher have taken up his parable from the state of this man's mind to-day. He had, apparently, all he could ask for—certainly far more than he could have expected to have; and while Hope was apparently smiling before him, he had never yet been so profoundly miserable! Unconquerable energy, and confidence in his own powers, were characteristics of the man, and yet now he doubted of himself: he was dissatisfied, despondent. His eyes were opened to behold good from evil; and from every object of ambition which might now be within his reach he turned away, for one which he had reason to fear was unattainable. The growth of a true passion in such a nature could not be like the grass of the field, which flourishes for a season and is then cut down; but rather like the ivy, which draws its strong arms tighter and tighter round the tree, until it overpowers in its embrace both stem and branches. In vain he struggled to shake it off:

unasked, the tender green crept closer and closer round the rough bark, sending its fibrous roots into every crevice, while the buds expanded and broadened into leaf, with the alternations of shower and sunshine.

He sat there for a long time, pondering upon what would have been to most men a great sacrifice, yet not to him, in his present frame of mind. If by one act he could attain but a step nearer to the object of all hopes now, he would count all sacrifice a gain. The shadow of the house had shifted imperceptibly from the western to the eastern terrace, and the sound of the returning carriages, coming at a brisk trot down the avenue smote his ear, before he raised his head from between his hands, and slowly went out to meet George on his return.

For those who had come a long distance there was a luncheon prepared. The two ladies, in mourning robes, looked very beautiful in their different styles, as they stood in the yellow satin drawing-room receiving their guests. The goddess Diana was known as such to all, but the fair,

fawn-eyed Psyche was an object of curiosity and speculation to most of them. She had the soft shy grace which especially wins men. Old Lord Castlegray was mightily taken with her, and said he could almost forgive Stourton his folly, now he had seen the cause of it. And so, a favourable report being carried back to the bosoms of their families, Lady Stourton, it was voted, should be accepted by the county.

George did not lose the opportunity of drawing both the Granfields, father and son, aside, and asking them, as the greatest favour they could do him, to remember Edgar, if the opportunity to serve him should occur. To Mr. Lichfield he preferred the same request, though he felt that that gentleman's feelings were, perhaps, rather sore against himself at this moment; for he had, up to last week, expected that his daughter would, sooner or later, become Lady Stourton. But county influence and connection is all-potent. Mr. Lichfield promised that he would not forget the young baronet's brother-in-law: if Mr. Faulconbridge lived at Stourton Towers during Sir

George's absence, Mr. Lichfield hoped to cultivate his acquaintance. As to Louis Granfield, he shook Edgar very cordially by the hand, and after promising to do all he could for him, added, while he reddened and laughed,—

"I suppose you've heard I'm going to follow George's example, after all? His speech wasn't so far wrong, you see. He gave me the lead, and I followed two days later. The morning we all left this, Lady Julia and I were in the same compartment on the railway for a couple of hours. So, you know, we had time to find out we were of one mind, and I'm an uncommonly lucky fellow, for if it hadn't been for that, I should never have had the pluck to tell her what I had thought ever so long, that she is the best girl this side of the Severn. Good-by, Faulconbridge; you must come and see me when we are settled."

So they all went their ways. The bustle of that dreary day came to a close. Twilight gathered round the great house, and brought Mr. Roundel up with his cheerful funeral details for Mrs. Pendarves; and gave the servants a respite, after

the day's labours, to discuss all the approaching changes in the establishment: and led the young master and mistress to seek for rest and privacy in their own private sitting-room.

And then, with a heart braced to meet the great crisis of his life, Edgar knocked at the door of Lady Trevelyan's boudoir.

CHAPTER XX.

RENUNCIATION.

"COME in," said the lady's voice.

She was alone. The curtains and blinds, now drawn fully back, let in the last glow of the evening sky. Though the sun was set, there was light enough left to read, and an open book lay upon her lap; but it is doubtful if she had read a single line. She sat near the fire, in a high-backed chair facing the door, as it opened, and Edgar walked in. During the whole interview he stood near her, with his back to the fire-place.

"Are you at leisure? I am come to talk to you upon matters of some moment to me, Lady Trevelyan. Will you listen to me?"

"By all means. Won't you sit down?"

"I had rather stand. You know what George wants me to do, Lady Trevelyan?"

"Yes, he spoke to me about it some days ago."

"And what was your advice to him?"

The lady hesitated for a moment.

"I told him I did not think you were suited to take the charge of a large property like this."

"You are quite right; so I think."

"Then you have declined his offer?"

"No, I have not. I wish, on the contrary, very much to accept it."

"That alters the case. Your abilities are such that whatever you turn your mind willingly, resolutely to, you will succeed in, I believe. George told me, last night, that you had already mastered the intricate statement of his affairs far better than he ever should."

"Let me understand you, then. It is not that you think me unsuited from incapacity to take this charge upon me, but from my character and habits? I have been accustomed to very little self-restraint or self-sacrifice. I have shown no indications of constancy or steadiness of purpose

in any line of life. I am therefore unfitted to have any grave interests dependent on my stability. Is it not this you mean?"

"No, Mr. Faulconbridge, I should not say that. What I have seen of you leads me to think you would pursue any idea you once conceive only too relentlessly. But these waters are too quiet, too monotonous for you; the turbulent stream of ambition is your proper element. I agree with Mr. Ferrers in thinking you would be happier——"

"Oh, Lady Trevelyan, don't quote Ferrers at me now, I beg of you. Men never understand each other. It requires a woman to see into a man's heart. Can you, Lady Trevelyan," he added, in a low voice, "can you look into mine at this moment? Can you see the one motive from which every action of mine must now spring? If I take this responsibility, or if I refuse it—if I go forth to struggle in those turbulent waters you speak of—whatever life, in short, I lead—my path henceforward must be dark, and without an object to cheer me onwards, if I have not one hope. It

is in your power to give me this hope, or to deny it me. Can you—*will* you look into my heart at this moment?"

"Mr. Faulconbridge, I cannot affect to misunderstand your language; but this is mere folly. You forget the difference of our ages, but *I* cannot forget it. You are still a boy, and I shall soon be an old woman. The idea of our marrying would be absurd. You will smile over it yourself, a year or two hence."

"Never!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "It is not in my nature to change. You yourself have said that I pursue an idea only too relentlessly. And if my heart remains the same, can the wretched common-places about unsuitability of age have a moment's weight with me? Is it so common to find two natures fitted to make each other's happiness, that the mere accident of the woman's having been born a few years before the man is to prevent their being united, if their paths happily cross each other? When I asked you this question some time ago, I thought—I hoped you agreed with me?"

Lady Trevelyan replied, gravely :—

"Very few cases justify the woman in committing this folly. She must be very sure of herself, and still more sure of the man whom she allows to sacrifice himself. In this case, Mr. Faulconbridge, I must first remind you that though circumstances have ripened our intimacy very quickly, still I have only known you three weeks, during two of which I believed you to be married. I will not conceal, indeed you cannot but see, that I have felt a great interest in you;—the interest of a much older woman for a young man in whom she sees some good, with an utter absence of principle to guide it. . . . I shall always feel this interest. We *are* cousins, you know; and I mean to take the privileges of one, in giving you a world of good advice. But this passing folly you must forget. See here," she continued, smiling, as she lifted back the dark hair from her temples, and showed a single thin streak of grey, "did I say wrong when I told you I should soon be an old woman? The law forbids you to marry your grandmother."

"You are afraid of what the world will say; is that it?"

"I am much more afraid of what my own conscience would say."

"Then you don't think you could ever love me. God! what fools we men are! I had fancied—I had *hoped* that perhaps in time, when you had tried me—when you found how true and unchanging my love was—your heart might soften. I said to myself, 'I am younger, and I am a man: my love is more passionate than hers can ever be; but in time I may make myself a necessity to her life—my devotion shall wear out her coldness and obduracy!' Is it utterly, utterly hopeless, Diana? We are cousins, you say; let me call you so."

She could not reply immediately: she turned her face towards the window. She had been struggling to assume a tone which was not natural to her: if she continued it longer now, she felt she should break down. She knew that, in one sense, what he sought was *not* hopeless; but, in another sense, she had arrived at the conclusion, not suddenly, but after long deliberation, that it

ought to be so. It was with an unsteady voice that she said, after a moment's pause—

"Cousin Edgar, even if there were no other considerations, no other impediments——"

"There is the difference in our stations, do you mean that?"

"No, no! nothing was further from my thoughts."

"And yet *my* pride, it seems to me, ought to take offence, rather than yours, at this difference. I am poor and nameless; you have rank, and you are rich. The humiliation is mine."

"You will make a name for yourself, which is better than any you could inherit."

"Are you sure you think that?"

"Quite sure."

"What if I had one,—with both rank and fortune, even now within my reach? Would it remove any of these impediments in your eyes, as it would in the world's? Cousin Diana, read this," and he drew from his pocket a folded paper, yellow with age, and worn.

She took it. She unfolded it. Her eye tra-

versed the few faded lines it contained; but it was a minute or two before she recovered from the bewilderment enough to seize their meaning fully.

It was the certificate of a marriage, dated October 30, 1811, between Richard Stourton and Teresa Conti, as performed by the Reverend William Blake, B.A., and duly attested.

"What—what does this mean?" murmured Diana Trevelyan, at last.

"It means that Sir Richard was actually married, after all, to my grandmother, though he repented 'at leisure' of the rash act, particularly when the full force of his brother's anger was brought to bear on him. The scheme of repudiating the marriage, of denying that any real ceremony had taken place, since there was but one witness, and the officiating clergyman was dead—this brilliant idea, it seems, is due to Sir Henry. Under pressure of his debts, in prison at the time, Mr. Richard Stourton was induced by his brother to write as he did to his lawful wife. Sir George declared he would leave him there to starve, unless he disavowed his marriage. All

this I have learnt from a packet of letters which I found with this certificate. As to his subsequent conduct, we all know how easy a downward path is. Restored to fashion and favour, a gay bachelor about London, was it likely that he should seek the wife for whom his first passion was already expended, and acknowledge his cowardly falsehood? I can well understand how, after her withering scorn, anything would have been preferable to meeting her again. He tried to believe her and the child dead—perhaps, he actually succeeded in persuading himself it was so. At all events, the years, as they passed on, drifted him further and further from the feelings of that time, when, in his hot passion, he resolved to sacrifice every consideration to his love for Teresa Conti. Wrapped in his miserable selfishness, I don't suppose there was a soft place in his heart, until George made one there. He never dared marry, of course. And one of those inexplicable superstitions, I suppose (I can account for it in no other way), prevented his destroying this record of his marriage."

"But where did you find it? It may be—it may be——"

"Not a genuine document? Oh, yes, it is. The position in which I found it would leave little doubt of that, even if its authenticity were not corroborated by the correspondence that was with it. It dropped from Sir Richard's hands after death. He had fallen forwards, if you remember Millet's statement, inside the fender, where he had evidently gone to *burn some papers*."

"This is too horrible!" exclaimed Lady Trevelyan, covering her face with her hands. "To think that at the very moment he was struck down——"

"—— He was about to consummate the work of his life by a simple act—throwing a few papers into the fire. That was all. In his frenzy and his terror, lest the dearest schemes of his life should prove abortive, and the only creature he cared for be suddenly stripped of his inheritance, it was the most natural thing for Sir Richard to bethink himself of this damning evidence, which his imprudence had allowed to exist all these years, and to resolve to destroy it forthwith."

Lady Trevelyan's face was white as she lifted it, and her hands dropped before her.

"Edgar, this is very terrible. What do you mean to do? Poor George! To think of the old man's going out of the world in the very act of committing this fresh crime! It makes my blood run cold. But why have you kept silence all these days?"

"Because it depends on you whether or not I shall keep silence for ever. Three weeks ago, the knowledge that my father's legitimacy could be proved, the knowledge that I was lawful heir to these estates would have gratified me, I suppose, beyond any other earthly thing. Now, I am comparatively indifferent to it—indifferent, at least, to the world's knowing the truth, though it is a satisfaction to myself, privately. I have no desire to dispossess George. He has grown up believing himself to be the heir to this property; let him keep it. My sister shares it. Her children, if she has any, will inherit it. Our grandmother's blood will flow in their veins, though not through me. My cousin, it is for you to

decide. If my having a definite position in the eyes of the world can influence you in the smallest degree, and if you tell me to assert my right, giving me hope of my ultimate reward, I will do so at once. But if you spoke sincerely just now, when you said that, to your thinking, the name a man won for himself was better than any he could inherit, confirm those words now; and I will at once and for ever renounce my claims. I can truly say, I value them only inasmuch as they may bring me nearer to you."

"This is madness. You cannot think of throwing away what Fate has so wonderfully reserved for you? You must put me out of the question. I cannot, I ought not to influence you; indeed, I ought not. Of course, I shall feel deeply for poor dear George. How can I help it? But I hope I am too just not to think it right that you should let the truth be known."

"That is not the question. I don't want to know whether you think it right. I want to know whether my conduct, either way, can influence your decision as regards myself."

She twisted her fingers tightly in the handkerchief on her lap; and she answered, but not without an effort,—

"I have told you that my decision is founded upon quite other grounds. . . . . Your succeeding to this title and estate will certainly not affect it."

"I felt sure of that," he said, quickly, "before I made *my* decision, subject to your wishes."

"I have no wishes—at least, I must refuse to express any. I only beg you to do nothing hastily."

"I have been a whole week thinking over this matter. I have arrived at the very definite conclusion that it is better things should remain as they are. George is a fine fellow, and will be far more popular as a great landed proprietor than I should ever be. I won't refuse to keep his house in order for him if I can; but it is far better that I should remain as the steward, and he the master; and, after a while, God willing, I will carve out a destiny for myself. You said just now that I was not fitted to have the responsibility of a large property, or something tantamount to it;

that the career of a man who has his own way to work was better suited to me than the career of a man who has only a bed of clover to lie upon, and look after. Well, I agree in this opinion. George shall keep the bed of clover, and I'll go out into the fields. If I read your thoughts rightly, you do not disapprove of this decision? Let me show Sir Richard's memory, then, *one* mark of respect, at least, by fulfilling his last intentions . . . ."

And turning towards the fire-place, he flung the marriage-certificate into the flames.

"Stay! stay! Good heavens! what have you done? Oh, Edgar, save it, if you can! This is too magnanimous, too rash! You may repent of your decision."

"And there will be nothing but these ashes to substantiate my claims. No, Diana, I shall not repent, since I am sure now, that *you* will never wish it otherwise."

He took her hand, and she looked up into his face, her eyes filled with tears.

"I feel guilty in this matter. I ought to

have stopped you. I ought to have said anything rather than let you make such a sacrifice. But you have a noble heart, my cousin. I am proud of you. There are very few men would do what you have just done. God reward you for that act of generous self-sacrifice. I do, in my heart, truly believe it will be blessed to you. I think you will be a happier and wiser man, working bravely for your bread and for a name, than you would be if you sat down here in luxury, depriving George, however justly, of the property he believes to be his own. I shall be wretched, Edgar, if this doesn't prove to be the case. If you grow weary in the struggle, if you repent of this act, I shall reproach myself with not having exerted myself to prevent it."

"I shall not grow weary in the struggle, if you will stand by me. You speak of reward, Diana. There is only one reward God can give me which I care anything for—that is yourself. To hear that dear voice, like the voice of an angel, in my ears, urging me on from strength to strength, is the only earthly prize I covet. It has driven the

devil out of me since I have been here. I came full of wrath and bitterness; I resolved publicly to denounce the old man who now lies dead. You first softened my heart, for you are the first woman I have ever loved. Other women may have roused my passions, no other woman has ever touched my soul. I feel I am an altered man, Diana: not a good one yet, very far from it; but at least susceptible of your good influence. Will you deprive me of all hope?"

Lady Trevelyan rose, and turned towards the window. As she did so, she passed the looking-glass, and stopped before it for a moment, and then, with a sigh, she moved on. Courage! There was but one effort more, and then this would be at rest for ever.

"I cannot bid you hope, Edgar. I have no right to do so. You are so young, that you have no knowledge of your own heart yet. You will meet with younger women, quite as able to influence you for good, I hope, as you say I am. We have these fancies when we are young—I had such myself—which time entirely

destroys. You have already sacrificed your birthright: I cannot accept the sacrifice of your youth. Tied to a woman so much older than yourself, the chain would soon press heavily on you. Put this foolish idea away from you, Edgar, once and for ever."

"Don't talk to me in that way. . . . Say that you can never love me enough to marry me, rather than this. I know myself, and I know that I shall not change. I am young in nothing but years, and in the impetuosity which belongs to my character. I have few illusions. I know the world as well as most men, and my own heart better than any one. I shall never love any other woman."

"You think so now," said Lady Trevelyan, shaking her head. "You will not think so ten years hence."

Was Lady Trevelyan right? Who shall say?

THE END.

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